10¢

DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

A POPULAR PUBLICATION
SEPT.

MURDER IN PARADISE

ANOTHER GREAT MYSTERY NOVEL
by **DAY KEENE**

RUSSEL GRAY RETURNS WITH—

THEY CAN'T KILL US!

A LONG NOVELETTE THAT IS TOPS IN EXCITING ENTERTAINMENT

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AND MANY OTHERS

2 AMAZING VALUES

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Three Squires Tobacco is mild, friendly, mellow. A great value at 15c. These tobaccos can be smoked individually or blended.

pipe shown 4/5 actual size

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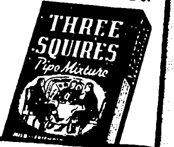

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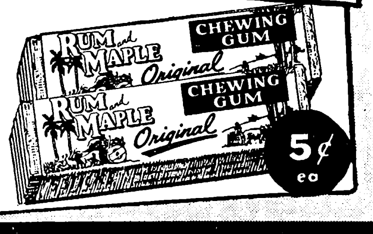
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THREE SQUIRES Pipe Mixture
MILD · FRIENDLY · MELLOW
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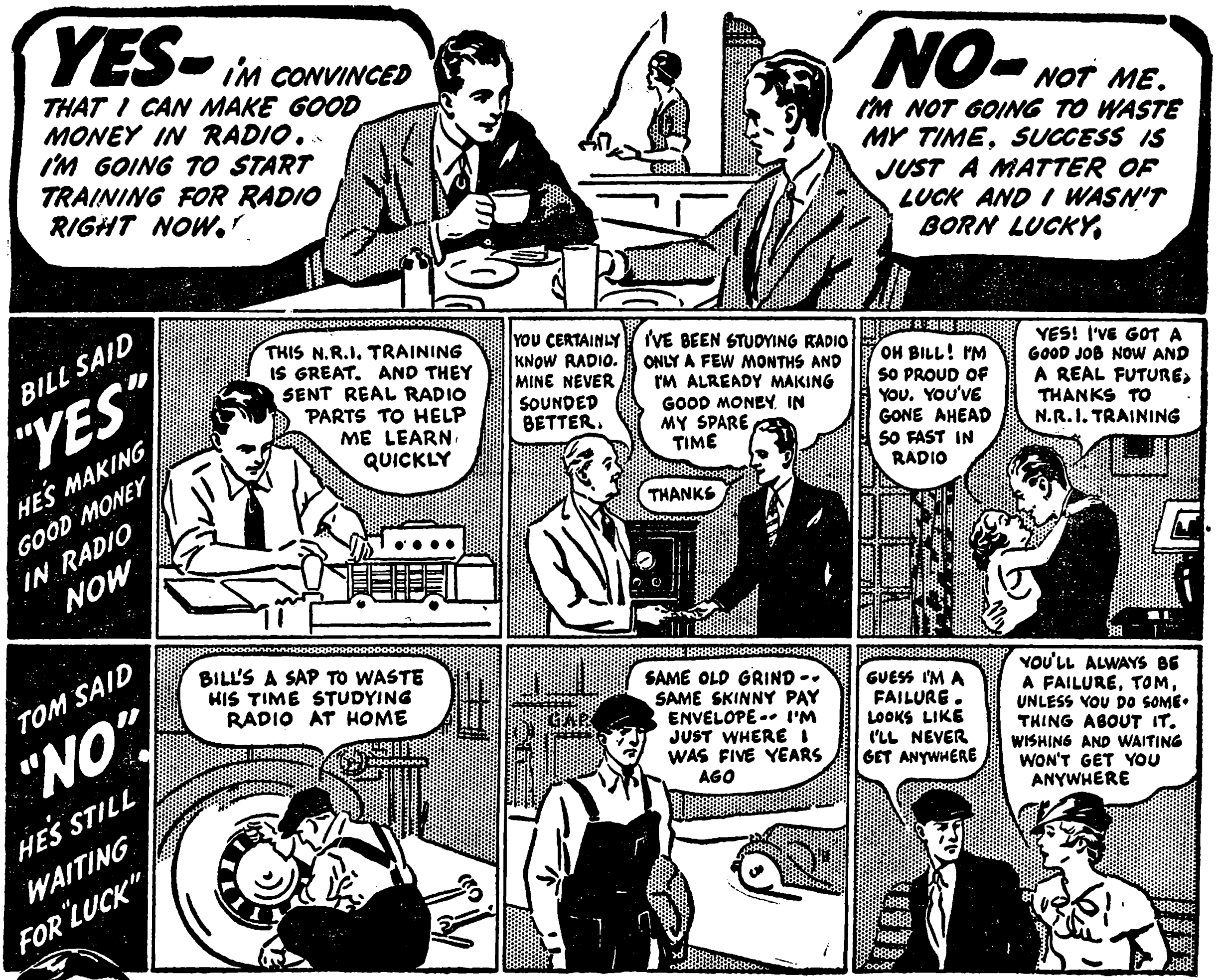
YES- I'M CONVINCED THAT I CAN MAKE GOOD MONEY IN RADIO. I'M GOING TO START TRAINING FOR RADIO RIGHT NOW.
NO- NOT ME. I'M NOT GOING TO WASTE MY TIME. SUCCESS IS JUST A MATTER OF LUCK AND I WASN'T BORN LUCKY.
BILL SAID "YES" HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY IN RADIO NOW
THIS N.R.I. TRAINING IS GREAT. AND THEY SENT REAL RADIO PARTS TO HELP ME LEARN QUICKLY
YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER.
I'VE BEEN STUDYING RADIO ONLY A FEW MONTHS AND I'M ALREADY MAKING GOOD MONEY IN MY SPARE TIME
THANKS
OH BILL! I'M SO PROUD OF YOU. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO
YES! I'VE GOT A GOOD JOB NOW AND A REAL FUTURE, THANKS TO N.R.I. TRAINING
TOM SAID "NO" HE'S STILL WAITING FOR "LUCK"
BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME
SAME OLD GRIND -- SAME SKINNY PAY ENVELOPE -- I'M JUST WHERE I WAS FIVE YEARS AGO
GUESS I'M A FAILURE. LOOKS LIKE I'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE
YOU'LL ALWAYS BE A FAILURE, TOM, UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. WISHING AND WAITING WON'T GET YOU ANYWHERE

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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE SEPT. 10th

Volume 26 *September, 1941* Number 2

AN OUTSTANDING MYSTERY NOVEL

MURDER IN PARADISE.......Day Keene 10

From Broadway to Paradise is a long trip, but Silent Smith made it—to prove the dead cannot return to advise the living in matters of matrimony, money—and murder!

TWO COMPELLING CRIME NOVELETTES

THEY CAN'T KILL US!.......Russell Gray 46

Lon's fake message summoned Steve to a complex burial party sponsored by Keeb, the blood-thirsty dwarf; Anton Arn, murder's missing link—and Ila, the beautiful girl who seemed to prefer Steve in a casket!

MURDER RAISES THE ANTE.......William R. Cox 78

How could Tom Kincaid call the killer's hand, after the deal of death engineered by George Grey, the mad ex-banker? Tom was gambler enough to accept the short *odds—but did he dare play out that grim and ghoulish game of "hide and die"?*

FOUR SPINE-TINGLING SHORT STORIES

CORPSES ON DISPLAY.......Robert C. Blackmon 37

The most pleasing package is a bundle from heaven. But the night Joe Ives saw that tiny form hurtling from the skies, he knew there'd be hell to pay.

MURDER'S MIDNIGHT JAMBOREE.......Francis K. Allan 68

Private operator Red Linton enjoyed combing debbie Patty Amherst from his flaming red hair—until she sent Red on a trail of screwy suicides and fantastic murders which could lead him only to the chair!

HIS GOOD ANGEL.......Harrison Storm 93

Lou Walker was no ordinary murderer. He had a "guardian angel" who talked to him, warned him, guided him—so that he could make no mistakes. Or could he? . . .

DEATH'S DELIVERY BOY.......Donald G. Cormack 102

Five bucks looked good to Tom Buckley, flat-broke ex-big shot—for he had a wife to support. He had no idea that his fee for delivering a letter would lead him and his lovely Barbara into the weirdest kidnapping case of all time!

—AND—

IN TIMES OF STRESS—.......The Editor 6

The caveman really started it.

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE SEPT. 10th

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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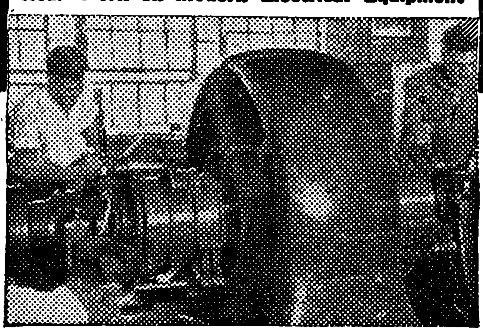

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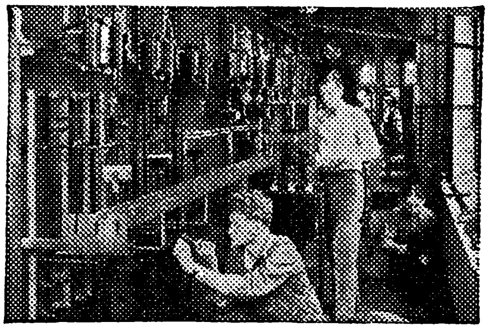

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IN TIMES OF STRESS—

THE first ape-man to climb down from his tree and become a caveman was no doubt a person of vision —and a dreamer. We like to think, though it's probably not so, that that night, in the snug comfort of man's first shelter, he made a brave effort to forecast the future of a civilization just getting its first toe hold in the earth. Perhaps he went so far as to envision the day when man would control and use the mystery that was fire. Perhaps he made bold claims that the time would come when man could, single-handed, triumph over all the fierce Carnivora of the forests.

One thing about this first caveman is certain. If he lived long enough, he most assuredly bragged to his grandchildren of those brave dead days when all men swung courageously in the tree-tops, scorning the softening comforts of a civilization fast becoming decadent. He told tall stories of high adventure in those glamorous days, and the children listened rapt and envious. Thus, in man's first leisure moment, in his first dwelling, was born the fine, brave art of story telling.

They were no doubt simple tales of personal conflict and accomplishment, but you may be sure that they were filled with the dangers and the mysteries which then surrounded mankind. You may be sure, too, the hearts of the listeners quickened to the robust tales of some mighty tribal warrior who had faced and conquered dangers, unexperienced by lesser men and women. In days of stress and danger their morale was strengthened and their courage whetted to a keener edge by the stories glibly told of other conflicts fought and won.

The art of story telling has grown with man, and each new tempest in the affairs of civilization—each new crisis which demands new courage and new inspiration—has witnessed a swift, climactic resurgence of the story teller's art . . . . It was so in the days of the old Crusaders, when skilled, professional troubadors plied their energetic, courage-giving trade.

From the very earliest times of man's beginnings, he has found in story telling a spiritual refreshment, new courage and —perhaps more important than all else— escape from the trials and tribulations of a world grown suddenly too strange and terrible for human acceptance.

Today, even as in those early days of the first caveman, the pattern, though expanded and embroidered, is basically the same. It is still the robust tale of danger, conflict and mystery to which men turn for an hour of forgetfulness. It matters not particularly that we, the reader, shall never in all probability personally experience the glamorous, exciting adventures of which we read. The very fact that such stories transport us temporarily from the normal, familiar worries and agitations of our own lives, into the bigger and more hazardous undertakings of imagined characters gives them their curative and restoring powers.

Although we know in our hearts that the chances of our ever facing dark and eerie hazards in a noble effort to rescue some beautiful lady of mystery from the shadowy perils which surround her are slight, indeed, there is ever present in our minds the remote possibility that some such glamorous adventure may some day befall us. The daily papers are filled with items of strange and lurid adventures befalling normal, everyday people such as you and me. It is not difficult, knowing this, to place ourselves in the role of some favorite fiction character; and our own vicarious thrill in his adventures will, on occasion, surpass any similar feelings we might experience if we, ourselves, were actually engaged in such action.

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

There are few of us, for instance, who will ever have an experience quite like the adventures of David Random that began on a certain very normal morning in his very normal office. Let David Random tell you about it in his own words:

* * *

A girl started it, coming quickly into the office without knocking. But she didn't pay any attention to me; I only worked there. She swung the door almost closed behind her, then for several seconds stood peeking out into the hall as though she expected to be followed.

I had the impression I was witnessing a scene in a moving picture thriller—but it was all very real to the girl. When she finally closed the door and turned around, I saw two things at a single glance. She was as terrified as I've ever seen anyone—and she was very beautiful.

"I—I'm sorry," she almost whispered. "I was so sure someone was following me! They mustn't know I came here."

"Take it easy," I said, smiling. She'd evidently seen too many wild mystery pictures. "Have a seat. Relax!"

My mood was getting more cheerful by the moment. A beautiful girl can do that—and this one had what it took. She had titian hair, emerald-green eyes, and the kind of a figure, that monkeys around with a guy's blood pressure.

She came over to my desk and plunked her handbag down—and right away I didn't feel so cheerful. The "plunk" of that bag could only have been caused by something heavy inside. Like a small automatic. And frightened girls packing shooting hardware can be as dangerous as they are unpredictable. I was glad the handbag was in sight.

"Don't begin talking right away," I said. "There's no hurry."

And then that damned phone rang again. That part wasn't so bad; it was hearing that imperative voice on the wire that ruined the hopeful improvement in my temper. It was the same guy who'd phoned before, demanding to speak to the unknown Nancy Corliss again.

"Listen, mister," I answered as patiently as I could. "You've got the wrong number. There's no one here by that name. Please go away!"

"It's the right number, bud," he snapped back. "You're Random, the private peek, and Nan's probably in your office right now!"

That almost floored me. I covered up the mouthpiece with my hand and turned to the girl, a puzzled frown on my face.

"Your name wouldn't be Nancy Corliss, would it, youngster?"

The effect of that was amazing! She came to her feet in a flash, the color draining from her face. Her lips were parted, as though for a moment she couldn't get her breath. She was trying to think fast.

"Who—never mind!" she said crazily. "Tell them there's no one here! Tell them you never heard of any one by that name!"

I gave the guy the message—then slapped the phone back on the hook and came to my feet as fast as the girl had done. She was already out of the office, though. I could hear her high heels clicking rapidly as she ran down the hall. I didn't stop to figure anything out then; I didn't even notice the handbag she'd left on my desk. I grabbed up my hat and went racing after her.

Which smart action, I'll admit, was simply *asking* for it!

* * * *

This, of course, is only the beginning. Donald Cormack tells the rest of it—as only Donald Cormack can—in a long novelette of weird mystery, which he has aptly called, "DANGER—HEARSES AHEAD!" It will be published complete in the next issue of DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE out on September 10th.

THE EDITOR.

THEY CALL ME THE "CHARLES ATLAS" OF PEORIA!

by H.W.

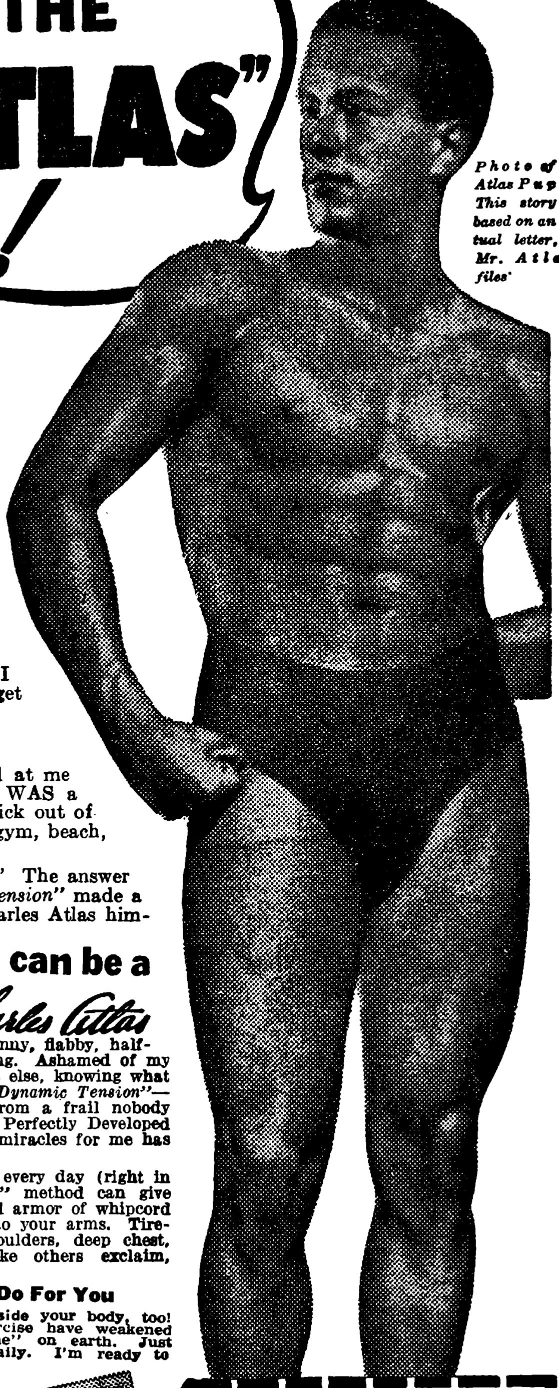

Photo of an Atlas Pupil. This story is based on an actual letter, in Mr. Atlas' files.

YES SIR! People call ME the "Charles Atlas of Peoria," which is my home town. They've named ME after the man who won the title "World's Most Perfectly-Developed Man!" And they are not kidding. They wouldn't DARE. Not with the fighting build, bulging muscles, smashing strength I've got now—the body that made me CHAMPION of the crowd!

But a short time ago I was a weakling—the "sissy" who took a back seat every time other fellows began showing their muscles. I had to sneak away whenever they did feats of strength. I *knew* what it meant to be the sorriest-looking specimen of the bunch. I wanted a real he-man build more than anything. I determined to get it. And I DID!

Here's How I Got My New Physique

Well, after a little while, my friends rubbed their eyes and looked at me twice. They couldn't believe I was the same person! Because I WAS a different person. And you can't blame me today for getting a big kick out of seeing that "What-a-Man!" look in their eyes whenever I strip for gym, beach, or around the swimming pool!

How did I do it? What *made* me "The Charles Atlas of Peoria?" The answer is—*Charles Atlas* HIMSELF! His marvelous method of *"Dynamic Tension"* made a NEW MAN of me. And now read what Charles Atlas himself has to say to YOU:

Photo of **CHARLES ATLAS.** *holder of title: "World's Most Perfectly-Developed Man."*

I'll prove that YOU, too, can be a NEW MAN! And it only takes 15 minutes a day

Charles Atlas

Fellows, I know what it means to be skinny, flabby, half-alive. I myself was once a 97-lb. weakling. Ashamed of my body. Afraid to stand up against anyone else, knowing what a beating I'd take. Then I discovered *"Dynamic Tension"*—the amazing method that changed me from a frail nobody into winner of the title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And now the secret that worked miracles for me has worked them for thousands of others.

In just 15 minutes of your spare time every day (right in your own home) my *"Dynamic Tension"* method can give YOU a new body. I can give you a solid armor of whipcord muscle. I can put smashing strength into your arms. Tireless stamina into your legs. Strong shoulders, deep chest, firmly-muscled abdomen that will make others exclaim, "There goes a HE-MAN!"

What 15 Minutes A Day Can Do For You

And "Dynamic Tension" digs down inside your body, too! If wrong living and lack of proper exercise have weakened you—here is the best natural "medicine" on earth. Just give "Dynamic Tension" 15 minutes daily. I'm ready to PROVE every word I say about it. Prove it to you first with actual photographs and letters from men I have made over. Then prove it with an actual TRIAL that will OPEN YOUR EYES—a trial that costs you NOTHING unless it really works!

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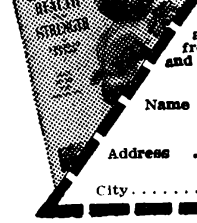

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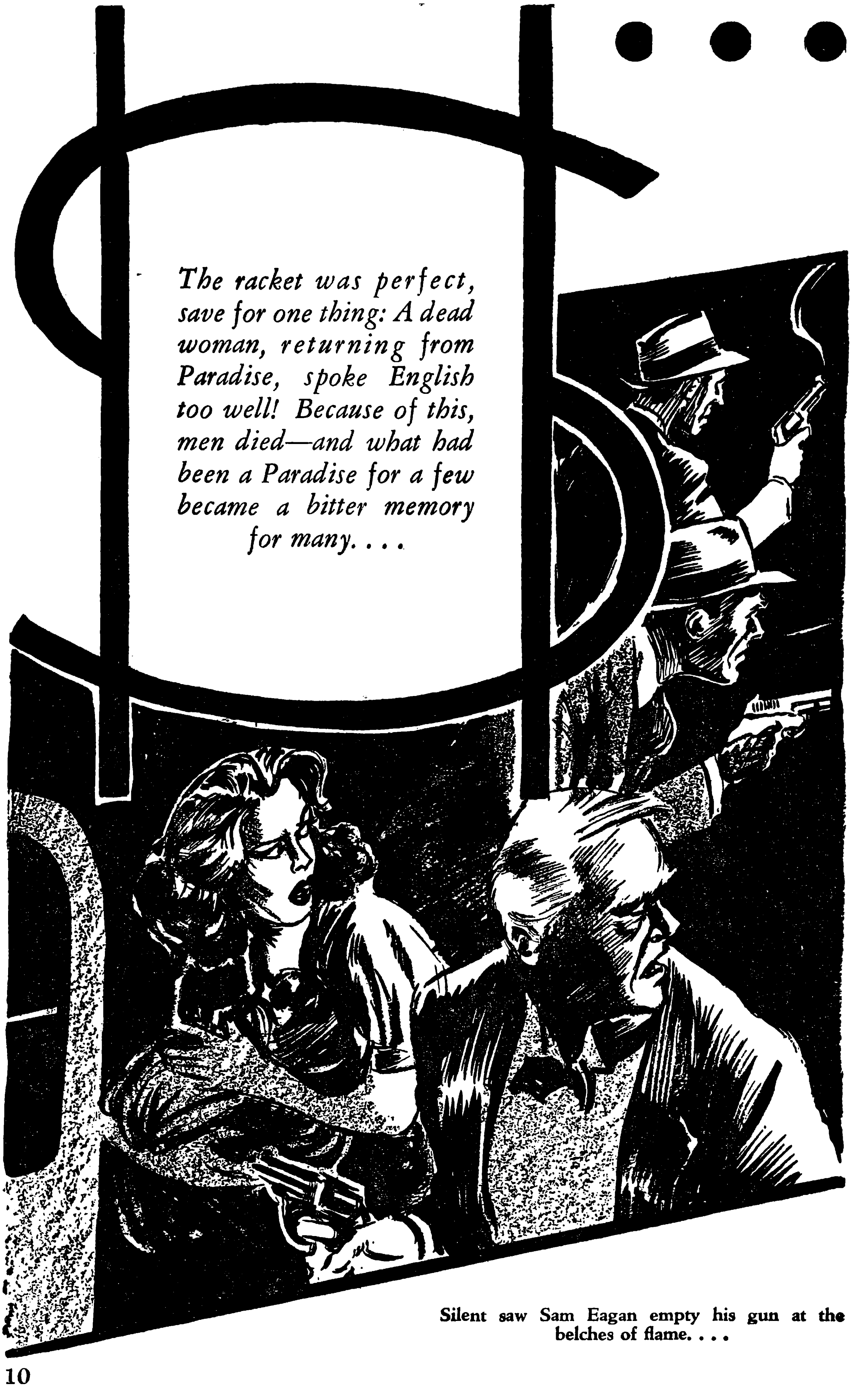

The racket was perfect, save for one thing: A dead woman, returning from Paradise, spoke English too well! Because of this, men died—and what had been a Paradise for a few became a bitter memory for many. . . .

Silent saw Sam Eagan empty his gun at the belches of flame. . . .

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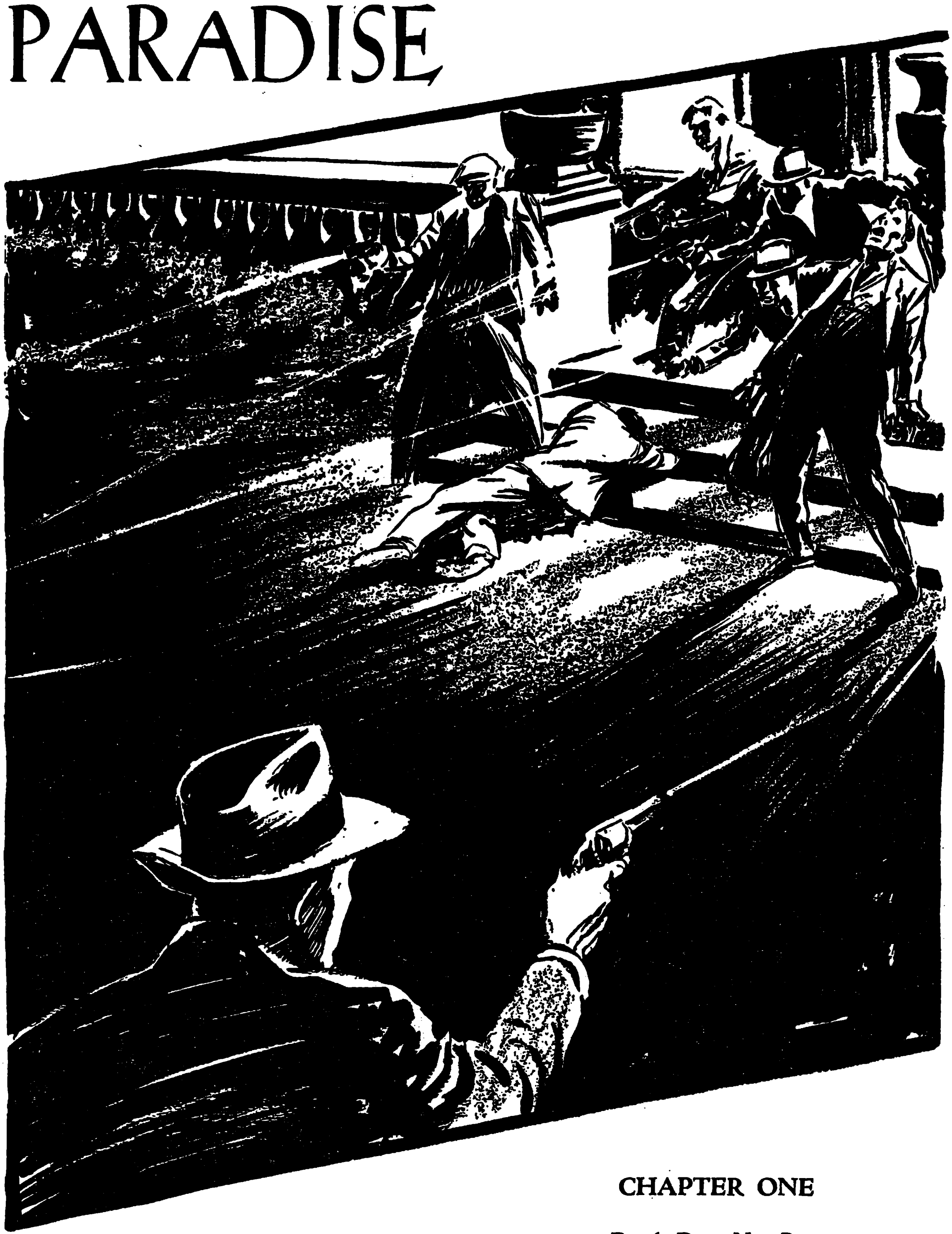

A New, Compelling Silent Smith Mystery Novel . . . .

By DAY KEENE

CHAPTER ONE

Death Does Not Part

THE LITTLE man back of the massive desk was slightly built. His suit was a modest gray, his hair was silver. His mouth was friendly, and his eyes were mild and blue. The corners of his eyes were etched by a thousand deep-creased wrinkles, testimony to his habitual smile. He was past sixty and looked forty. He might have been a chainstore grocery clerk, but wasn't. The four carat, square-cut diamond in his tie would have bought and stocked a dozen grocery stores.

"You think then," he asked the rangy colored youth across the desk from him, "that you'd be willing to work for me?"

"Yes, sir. 'Deed I would, Mist Smith." The colored boy beamed. "I dunno of anythin' of which I would be fonder."

The silver-haired gambler's smile widened. "All right." He looked at the papers on his desk again. "All right, Thurman, we'll consider it settled. Bill Morrow will explain your duties."

He pressed a button on his desk, and the smile left his lips. "You understand, son," he added, "we never discuss our business with outsiders. My boys take orders without question, and any breach of loyalty to me, or to the organization, could prove, well—" He left the sentence unfinished, but his meaning was clear enough.

The colored boy raised one white-palmed hand. His eyes and his voice were serious. "Yes, sir, Mist Smith. 'Deed I do. I does as I am told, an' keeps my mouth shut. An' they ain' a closer mouthed boy in Harlem than what I am."

Smith's smile returned. He nodded pleasantly. "Then you'll get along with us just fine, Thurman."

The door to the office opened. There was a brief blur of subdued conversation, a click of chips, and the whirr of a roulette wheel before the door closed.

"I was just on my way in to see you, Chief, when you rang for me," Morrow told Smith. Morrow was a tall, lean-faced youngster, who was known along the Stem as Smith's second-in-command. He was also, with Sam Eagan, an heir apparent to the throne. "Ex-Senator Wallace is outside. He wants to write a check."

The silver-haired gambler smiled. "Well, cash it. Johnny Wallace is good in my place for any sum he cares to write."

"I know that, Chief," Morrow said. "But the Senator wants to see you personally, says he wants to close out his account."

Smith raised his eyebrows slightly, and looked at the pad on his desk. It was only the seventeenth. He ran his Casino—the only one officially tolerated in New York through a dozen administrations—as a Casino should be run, after the fashion of an almost forgotten day when an honest gambler had still been a pastime for gentlemen, and not a graft-inflated football to be kicked back and forth between the underworld and politics. Admission was by card. If you were known to the house, you played with markers. If you weren't known, you didn't play. When you won, your winnings were tallied, and you were mailed a check. When you lost, you were billed on the first of the month. If you couldn't afford to gamble, Silent Smith didn't want your money.

"Ask Johnny to step in," Smith instructed Morrow. He indicated the colored boy. "This is Thurman. He's taking over Sugarfoot's old job."

The colored boy followed Morrow to the door.

"Which reminds me, Bill," Smith added, "mail a check to Sugarfoot's widow in the morning."

The colored boy gulped. He managed, "Oh, oh. . . ."

Even Morrow smiled at that. "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown," he quoted. "Even if it's on Thurman, the new lavatory man."

The door closed behind them. Alone in the office, Smith went to the files, and returned to his desk with Ex-Senator

Wallace's account. He noted, mildly interested, that the ex-senator hadn't been doing so well. Wallace was almost five thousand dollars in the red, for which the aged gambler was genuinely sorry. Not that the small amount would put even a dent in the Wallace millions; but it proved that Johnny had never conquered his weakness for trying to draw inside straights when he should have folded in.

Smith looked up from the card to the silver-framed picture on his desk. A sweet-faced woman of forty smiled back to him. Smith felt a sudden wave of sadness.

"There aren't many of the old crowd left, Martha," he told the picture. "That old man with the scythe is mowing us down. Not," he added disapprovingly, "that age is any excuse for Johnny to have made the fool of himself that he has this past year. I always thought he loved Sarah almost as much as I loved you."

◆

JOHN WALLACE flourished a check book with an almost theatrical gesture. He was a short, heavy man in his middle sixties, with snow white hair and a seemingly inexhaustible fund of nervous energy that belied his obvious years. He wore a bone induction hearing aid behind one ear, its black wire dangling to the instrument itself, worn openly on his coat lapel. His eyes were clear and bright—he looked younger, healthier, and happier than Smith had seen him look in years.

Smith knew him well. Both men had fought their way from the same block in the slums of old New York's lower East Side to the top. And, until the ex-senator's recent marriage—to a girl scarcely out of her teens—had remained friends through the years.

"Yes, I'm settling all accounts," Wallace beamed. "You see, Silent," he confessed, "I'm going away, and I don't want to leave any debts behind me. I owe you how much, Silent?"

Silent Smith looked at the card on his desk. "Four thousand, eight hundred and twenty-five dollars," he said, and raised his eyes to stare thoughtfully at the flushed face of his old friend as Wallace wrote out the check.

"And another thing, Silent." Wallace smiled as he capped his fountain pen. "You were my best man when Sarah and I were married, so I want you to come to the little farewell party that I'm giving tomorrow night. It's an anniversary dinner." He added proudly, "Sarah's and my forty-fifth wedding anniversary."

The gambler studied the check in his hands. "Now, wait just a minute, Johnny," he said quietly. "Whether I approved or not doesn't make any difference, but you can't do a thing like that. You've a new, young wife now—"

"Of course I have." Wallace waved his objections away. "But Mary understands. She knows that I've been seeing Sarah for months. In fact, it was Sarah who told me that Mary would come into my life. And when she did, it was Sarah who insisted that we marry."

Silent looked up, sharply, but said nothing, just sat toying with the check. Wallace produced a handful of expensive cigars. He handed one to Silent and one to Morrow, who had come in with him.

"These are on me, boys," he chuckled. "Mary told me about it just the other morning."

"She. told you what?" Smith asked flatly.

Wallace seemed surprised. "Why, that I'm going to have an heir." He added, more mildly, "But that's right. You didn't know why I married the girl, did you, Silent? You wouldn't give me a chance to explain. You thought I was just a lecherous old goat. But that was why Sarah insisted that I marry the girl, so I could have an heir." He chuckled. "After all, there had to be someone to carry on my name, someone to whom I could leave my money."

Smith's voice sounded strange, even to himself. "You say you've been seeing Sarah for months?"

"Of course." Wallace chuckled. "Don't look so shocked. You know how much I've always thought of Sarah."

The silver-haired gambler nodded.

A look of almost fanatic eagerness appeared in the other's eyes. He said:

"I'll always be in love with Sarah. And sometime after our anniversary dinner tomorrow night, Sarah has promised to call for me—we're going away together."

"No, no excuses," he hurried on as Smith held up his hand. "We'll be expecting you tomorrow night at nine. I know you'll be glad to see Sarah."

The door closed behind him, and Smith stared at it. He tossed the expensive Havana on his desk, lighted a long, thin panatella, and continued to stare at the door.

"Of course, Chief," Morrow said quietly, "it isn't any of my affair. But isn't that carrying modern open-mindedness a little too far? An ex-wife telling a man to marry a young girl to have an heir—and as soon as he does, taking him away from the younger woman."

"You've missed the point entirely, Bill," the silver-haired gambler sighed. "Johnny Wallace's first wife, Sarah, is dead. *She's been dead for fifteen years!*"

CHAPTER TWO

The Road to Paradise

BOTH the drawing and dining rooms were enormous. In each, low-silled, ceiling high windows opened out over Central Park South, twenty floors below.

The table was a tableau of snowy linen, silver-plate, and crystal. The only light came from multi-branched candelabra, ablaze with tall white candles at each end of the table.

Men and women wore formal clothes; but they seemed oddly ill at ease, for all their finery.

In his day, Smith had attended many dinners; but he had never attended one like this. Still, he was glad that he'd come, for Death was the ninth guest at the table. Smith had gambled with it too often to fail to recognize its ominous presence.

Besides himself, his host and hostess, there were five other guests. A too-young widow, in extreme décolleté, sat at his left. She'd been introduced to him as Mrs. Durham, and both the name and the girl were vaguely familiar. At his right sat Harmon Jones, the lawyer. The other guests were Tony Leightner, a one-time prohibition big shot whom Smith had believed dead; Alverdez Ronaldo, one of the old East Side crowd; and Lazarus—the self-styled spiritualistic prophet of the Lord.

A tall, gaunt man, with blazing, fanatical eyes, this Lazarus, whose presence at the dinner explained much. The man was a palpable fake, but he was clever. He claimed that his revelations and his source of income came from the beyond. He accepted no contributions from his followers, yet lived in lavish style. For those of his flock who cared to abide with him, he maintained a Long Island Paradise.

The police had raided him often, and found nothing to his discredit. He had a large and devoted following among whom, Smith realized with a shock, was the former United States Senator, John Wallace.

Smith turned to his right hand neighbor. "What do you think of Lazarus?" he asked.

Harmon Jones smiled thinly. A successful corporation lawyer who had crashed in the debacle of '29, only to beat his way back to the top again, Jones was a practical man.

"A fanatic fake," he snorted. He glanced at their host. "But he certainly seems to have pulled the wool over Johnny's eyes."

Smith nodded. "So it seems," he said, and turned to smile at his left hand neighbor. "Are you an old friend of Mrs. Wallace's?"

"No," the girl told him. "I'm not." She seemed to be frightened of something. Smith had the impression, as he'd had all evening, that she was fighting a desire to tell him something. She added rather flatly, "Mrs. Wallace and I only met recently."

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Ronaldo claimed the girl's attention, and Smith turned back to Jones.

"Know anything about the girl sitting next to me?" he asked the lawyer quietly.

"Not much," Harmon Jones admitted. "That is, just what I've read in the papers." He lowered his voice. "You must have read about her, Smith. She's the girl who married old Durham, the septuagenarian. Remember? He died shortly after their son was born and left the boy something like seven million dollars."

Smith whistled softly. "No wonder she looked familiar." He added, "You don't happen to know, do you, if old Durham was one of Lazarus' flock?"

"No, I don't know that," the lawyer replied. He looked past Smith, at the girl talking to Ronaldo, and chuckled. "But if the old fake could produce a bride like that for me out of the hereafter, I don't know but what I'd become one of the faithful. Queer crowd, eh?" he added.

Smith admitted that it was. He didn't understand Leightner's presence at all, nor Ronaldo's for that matter. Nor did he understand the present Mrs. Wallace. The girl was not more than twenty-one and obviously a lady. Girls of her type didn't usually marry men of sixty-five, not even for their millions.

He ate slowly, thoughtfully, listening to the inconsequential conversation. He attemped, with meager success, small talk from time to time with the young widow at his side.

At last he said: "I imagine that boy of yours is quite a young man now."

For the first time her face lighted. "Oh, he is," she told him. "He's adorable. He—"

"A shame his father had to die," Smith said quickly.

The light went out of her eyes. She seemed to sag; and the hunted look returned. "Isn't it?" she agreed, and turned her attention to her plate.

◆

EX-SENATOR WALLACE stood up, raising a hand for attention. Smith noticed that he hadn't spared the wine and was a trifle unsteady on his feet. He wished that Johnny would come to his senses and stop making such a fool of himself.

Wallace held up his glass. "Here's to as many happy years in Paradise with Sarah as we spent on earth together."

"It will be for all eternity," the prophet, Lazarus, intoned; "for in Paradise there is no parting."

The ex-senator's tongue was thick. "Where there is no parting," he repeated. He gulped his drink.

The others drank more slowly. Smith didn't drink at all. His eyes were on the butler, who was already re-filling Johnny's glass.

The girl beside Silent said, "Mr. Smith," sharply, under cover of the babble of conversation.

Silent turned to her. "Yes—"

"I can trust you," she began. "I know I can. I want to tell you—" She stopped, fear in her eyes.

Smith turned his head. Harmon Jones was watching them, curiously. Beyond him, Lazarus was glowering at the girl. Smith turned back to her. "You can trust me. What do you want to tell me?"

Her face was deathly pale. She shook her head. "Nothing," she told him. "It isn't important. I—I've really forgotten what I was going to say."

Ronaldo drew her attention with a remark about a current musical show. Smith didn't like the way the man could claim her immediate attention, but the young widow seemed relieved to talk to him.

"This is the wierdest dinner party I've ever attended," Jones whispered in Smith's ear. "If it wasn't that Johnny gives me a lot of business, I wouldn't be here. It was quite a surprise to see you."

"I imagine," the gambler said dryly, "that I'm quite a surprise to quite a few of the guests. Johnny asked me as an afterthought, the way I figure. He dropped into my place to square his account and remembered that I had been his best man when he and Sarah were married. He told me that this was a fare-well party, that he was going away with Sarah."

Jones was shocked. "Going away with Sarah? But she's dead!"

"I know that," Smith said flatly. "That's why I'm the man who came to dinner."

Jones groaned, "It probably means that there will be a séance after dinner."

"Probably," Smith agreed.

The meal dragged on, through indifferent conversation and good wine, for what seemed like hours. Finally the plates were cleared and fat-bellied brandy glasses supplanted the goblets of wine. Smith half rose in his chair, expecting the ladies to leave. But Mrs. Wallace kept her place; so did Mrs. Durham.

"Do smoke, by all means," Mrs. Wallace said to her guests. She, too, seemed afraid of something—she kept eyeing her husband strangely; and once Smith thought he saw tears in her eyes.

Smith found himself watching Leightner. The one-time powerful gangster of the prohibition era had said little so far. Smith probed for information. He and Leightner had never been friends, but they had never been enemies either.

"It's been a long time since I've seen you, Tony," Silent called across the table. "What are you doing now?"

"I'm a neophyte," Leightner told him seriously. "I'm going to be a medium. I live in Paradise."

"Verily, verily," Lazarus nodded. "The Lord hath pointed out the evil of his ways and sent him to me. Yeah, if thy sins be as scarlet, if thou hast faith thou shalt be cleansed. The Lord hath sent his lost sheep to me to be saved."

Smith doubted very much if Tony Leightner could be saved, but he didn't say so. It didn't seem good table manners.

He was relieved when Johnny Wallace turned at last from the brandy, suggesting that they retire to the drawing room.

Smith looked at his watch. It was midnight.

He tried to find an opportunity to speak to his friend alone, and failed—Lazarus trailed the stocky, ex-senator constantly. It gave Smith an eerie feeling, as if the man with the blazing eyes was acting as a spiritual adviser to a man already condemned.

He did, however, find a chance to say: "You were joking in my office, weren't you, Johnny? I mean, about going away with Sarah?"

"No." The liquor-befuddled man shook his head, maudlin tears welling to his eyes. "She promised to come for me." He turned to the medium for confirmation. "Dididn't she, Lazarus?"

"So I am told," the spiritualist nodded gravely. "You see," he admitted to Smith, "I never know what happens when I am in a trance. My mind, my soul, my body, are in spiritual control—"

"I'll bet," the gambler muttered irreverantly. He took his old friend by the shoulder. "Come on now, Johnny. Snap out of this. You know as well as I do Sarah's dead."

"Yes, I do," Wallace nodded.

"Then use your head, man." Smith tried to shock him into sense: "If you go away with Sarah, don't you realize you'll be dead?"

"I'd like to be with her, Silent," the other man said quietly. "I love her, and I'm lonely."

THERE was nothing more that Smith could say. He knew what his old friend meant. He, too, had often felt that way—but not when he was sober.

He looked around the room. Eight straight backed chairs had been arranged in a small circle.

Lazarus said, "You will please sit in the same positions that you occupied at the table."

"This is poppy-cock," Smith protested. "It's all a screen to cover something. I'll be damned if I know exactly what it is, but—"

"Please, Silent," Wallace begged. "You were our best man. For Sarah's sake. . . ."

Smith subsided, a ruffled, silver-combed bantam. He was glad that the circle was small. He could keep his eyes on Lazarus and Leightner.

Suddenly the lights dimmed.

"You will please join hands with your neighbors," Lazarus instructed. "Form the circle of the faithful. We are going to ask the wife of brother Wallace to come to us again tonight."

Smith snorted his derision, but obediently groped for and found the hand of Mrs. Durham. It was cold, moist, and it trembled within his. He felt Jones groping for his other hand.

"Poppy-cock is right," the lawyer whispered. "Johnny Wallace is as mad as a March hare. And I'm not so sure that we aren't, for aiding and abetting."

"Neither am I," Smith told him.

"Silence!" Lazarus ordered.

The lights dimmed even lower, until only a faint, green spot shone on the medium's face. Smith tightened his grip on the hand of the girl to his left.

Lazarus asked for silence, for receptive minds. Then he began to pray. His prayer was long and jumbled, his words becoming more and more indistinct. Then his head slumped suddenly on his chest.

"Now what happens?" Silent asked.

Someone around the circle said, "Quiet!" Johnny Wallace said, "Please!"

His eyes growing accustomed to the light, Smith made certain that the circle wasn't broken. There was no sound other than the heavy breathing of the group. Lazarus was in a trance, or pretending to be—his jaw hung open slackly, his eyes rolled, with only the whites of them showing in the faint green light.

Then a woman's voice spoke out of the darkness. It seemed to come from everywhere as it reverberated around the spacious room.

It called out happily: "John! John, dear. I've come for you!"

Smith felt the girl's hand in his tighten quickly. Jones, to his right, gasped sharply.

"Yes, yes, Sarah," Johny Wallace answered his voice. "I—I've been waiting for you."

A soft glow of misty light began to grow in a corner of the room. It faded, grew again—and became the shadowy figure of a woman.

Smith swore to himself. Fake or not, the thing looked like Sarah Wallace as he had last seen her.

The figure was holding out its arms. "Come to me, come to me, dear," it called.

"But how ,sweetheart? Tell me how?" Wallace begged. "How can I bridge the gap between us?"

The shadowy figure of the woman moved closer to the circle. "By having faith," it told him. "All you have to do is—"

"Just a minute," Smith cut in coldly. "You're the spirit of Sarah Wallace?"

"I am Sarah," was the reply.

"Then you should know me," the silver-haired gambler said. "Tell me who I am!"

"Silent, Silent," the misty figure murmured. "It's Silent Smith, the gambler."

The short hairs stood erect on the back of the gambler's neck. This had to be a fluke—this thing couldn't be.

He asked: "And my wife, your best friend's name was—"

"Why, Martha, of course." The misty figure waved and bobbed, as if experiencing difficulty in remaining earthbound so long. "She's here in Paradise with me. She often speaks of you."

Smith's throat was dry. Few knew Martha's name. Against his better judgment he was tempted to believe. He asked one final question. "And I—I met Martha how, where?"

The figure moved away. "Come, dear. Come, John," it evaded the question, "I'm waiting for you."

Smith drew a long, deep breath. His heart began to beat again, the ache receded from his throat.

"How can I come to you, Sarah?" The stocky, ex-senator dropped the hands of those who sat on either side of him. He stood. "Tell me how, dear?" There was a sob in the old man's throat. "I've done as you asked. There's to be an heir to bear my name. I'm old and lonely and tired. Please, Sarah—please tell me *how* to come to you!"

He moved towards the figure. It backed away from him, its shadowy arms outstretched. John Wallace followed.

It was then that Silent got the idea. He shouted, "No, Johnny! For God's sake wait! Listen to me!"

Even in the indistinct light he could see that the safety bars and the screen had been removed from the tall window toward which the figure was backing. The gambler tore his hands loose, lurching forward.

An out-thrust foot sent him sprawling to the floor, and when he got to his feet again—both his friend and the figure were gone!

"Good Lord!" Jones said in horror. "Wallace stepped right out of the window!"

A man's scream, torn from his throat in too lately awakened terror, pierced the night. The lights were suddenly turned on, and Smith and Jones stared at each other.

Then Smith's eyes swept the circle. Lazarus was still in his trance, or pretending that he was. Ronaldo was staring wide-eyed at the window. Mrs. Wallace had fainted. Mrs. Durham's face was buried in her arms. Her bare shoulders shook with sobs. Tony Leightner's veiled eyes seemed amused.

Smith tried to speak, and couldn't. He turned back to the window, looked out and down. A crowd was beginning to form. A policeman's whistle bleated. In the distance, a siren answered.

CHAPTER THREE

Talk Is Costly

THEY sat, as they had sat at dinner, with two exceptions. Mrs. Wallace was under the care of a hastily summoned nurse and doctor. Ex-Senator Wallace was dead, and Captain Craig of Homicide had replaced him at the head of the table. In the drawing room, where the séance had taken place, the police stood and looked at one another. There was little or nothing for them to do.

"His dead wife's spirit. Bah! Come clean. Come clean," Craig roared. He pounded one huge fist on the table. A crystal decanter of brandy shattered at the impact. Craig ignored the golden stain that spread across the table. His beefy, red jowls wabbled like a turkey's wattle. "Speak up, one of you wooden-faced monkeys, or I'll book the whole lot of you for murder!"

"It wasn't murder, Captain Craig," Ronaldo protested. "I tell you that there was no one near him. Johnny Wallace walked out of that window himself!"

Craig's red face grew purple. "Don't give me that again," he scoffed. "Men with young and pretty wives, and no financial worries, don't walk out of windows!"

Tony Leightner shrugged. "Johnny Wallace did."

Smith felt the girl beside him shudder. Her face was white and drawn, and there were deep circles under her eyes. She seemed to be fighting the same inner fear of something that she'd fought all evening. She said, "Captain Craig—"

He glowered at her. "Yes, Mrs. Durham?"

"I—I wonder if I could—"

Smith could read the next words on her lips. They were, "talk to you alone." But the girl lost her courage. She stopped, one hand pressed to her throat.

"You wonder if you could what?" Craig asked.

"Nothing—nothing of importance," she said. "Only I—I have a very young baby at home, and I wondered if I could leave?"

Craig ignored her request, to turn his attention to Smith. "What did you just stop that girl from telling me?" he demanded.

"Nothing," Smith answered truthfully. "But, might *I* ask how long you intend to keep us here?"

"As long as I please!" Craig pounded the table. He sneered, "I suppose, as usual, your hands are lily white?"

"They are."

Craig said, "I'll bet." The feud between these two was a bitter one of long standing. Smith resented the captain's stupid brutalness and itching palm that had no place in modern law enforcement; Craig resented the fact that Smith had never, and swore that he would never, pay tribute on his extra-legal activities. He preferred to use the money, which other gamblers paid in tribute, to give boys without a home a chance in life.

Craig picked up a check book from the pile of John Wallace's personal possessions that lay before him on the table. "Then suppose you tell me this, Smith," he said sarcastically, "why should Wallace have written you a check for four thousand, eight hundred and twenty-five dollars yesterday?"

"Because he owed it to me. It was a gambling debt. When he paid, he invited me to his party."

Craig's eyes swept the faces at the table. "Some party! A fake medium who runs a phony Paradise; a one-time prohibition big shot; an ex-con; a reputable lawyer; a young widow—and Ulysses Silent Smith, the big-time Broadway gambler!" He crashed his fist down on the table. "Bah!"

Jones spoke for the first time. "If I might make a suggestion, Captain Craig. The facts of the case have been given to you. We saw, call it a spirit or what you will, materialize in the next room. Before we could stop him, Wallace followed it out of the window. There are six of us who can testify in court to that. And I, personally, reminding you that I am a lawyer, reiterate Smith's question. How long do you intend to keep us here?"

The homicide captain scowled. "In other words, book you, or order your release."

"Precisely," the lawyer nodded.

Craig bellowed into the other room. "You boys found anything in there? Any sliding mirrors, or trick walls, or anything like that?"

"Not a thing," Sergeant Hanson told him. "Except for a rheostat on the light switch and a green baby spot, it's as clean as a whistle in here."

"All right," Craig admitted defeatedly. He glowered around the table. "All of you, except the servants, are released on your own recognizance. But you are all under suspicion, and I may pick you up again at any time!"

THERE was a scraping of chairs. Now that they were free to go, they, humanly peverse, stood talking in little groups. All but Mrs. Durham.

Caig walked the length of the room to where Smith stood with Harmon Jones.

"How come, Smith," he demanded, "that whenever I have a tough murder to crack I can always find you around?"

The silver-haired gambler smiled wryly. "Don't get me wrong on this, Craig. Johnny Wallace was my friend. And I'm 'all out' to get the man or men who killed him."

"Meaning that you and your boys are going in this on your own."

"That's right."

Craig made, for him, a big concession. "Well, you've helped the department in the past. But sometime you're going to go too far and I'm going to catch you with your nose dirty, Smith. When I do, it's curtains."

"Fair enough," the gambler agreed. He turned away, to go in search of Mrs. Durham, who had left the room.

Craig button-holed Harmon Jones. "You're a lawyer. You know who handled Wallace's affairs? You know any way that I can find out how his will reads, without going through the mess of usual red tape?"

"Yes," Jones admitted, "I do." He seemed embarrassed. "I know how the will reads. It was my firm that drew it up."

The buzz of conversation in the room stopped short.

"Now isn't that convenient," Craig said. "Wallace left how much?"

Jones said quietly, "Including both real and personal, I'd say about ten million dollars."

"To whom?"

"To his expected child—the estate to be administered by a guardian named to serve, without bond, until the child shall reach maturity."

"And that guardian is?"

"The child's mother. Mrs. Wallace was named sole guardian of the money and the child."

Craig looked disappointed. "Then you don't make a dime by the senator kicking off?"

Jones got the implication. "Now, just

a minute, sir," he told Craig stiffly. "You aren't implying—"

"I don't believe in ghosts," Craig told him coldly. "I'm looking for a killer. As far as I am concerned, every suspect in a case is guilty until he is proved innocent."

He turned to Lazarus. "You there!"

The medium glowered at him with his fanatical, blazing, eyes. "Yes?"

"You introduced Wallace to his bride?"

"You are referring to his spiritual bride through all eternity, or to the girl to whom he was recently joined in wedlock here on this sinful earth?"

"The girl will do."

The medium shook his head. "No, I did not. That is, not directly. Sarah Wallace, his first wife, came to him in a séance and told him that the girl would come into his life. They met, I believe, as his first wife said they would, on a bench in Cenrtal Park." He pressed his long white fingers to his temple. "These things are told to me. When I am in communication with the other world I know nothing of such matters."

Captain Craig brought him back to earth by persisting, "But it was through you—indirectly, if you wish—that Wallace met this girl he married."

"If you wish to put it that way, yes."

"That's good enough for me, at least for a starter." Craig raised his voice. "Sergeant Hanson!"

"Yes, Captain?"

Craig indicated Lazarus. "Take Holy here down to Centre Street. Toss him in a cell. Book him on suspicion of murder. I'll be down in half an hour to sweat him."

The medium began to protest, but Leightner stopped him. "Take it easy, Lazarus. They haven't a thing on you. I'll get a lawyer and have you out on a writ within an hour." He smiled contemptuously at Craig and walked out.

To get a shave that is a shave
And look well-groomed in record time
Use Thin Gillettes. Think what you save!
Why four swell blades cost just a dime!
Outlasts ordinary blades two to one!
THIN Gillette BLADES Gillette
Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade
4 for 10c
8 for 19c
Save Extra Money! Get The Big New Economy Package, 12 For 27c

Craig let him go, but ordered: "Put a tail on Leightner. And the rest of you," he told them, "watch your step. This was murder. And whoever was in back of it is going to burn!"

They filed slowly out of the room. Smith felt old and tired and confused. Unless the dead could return, which he doubted greatly, murder had been done before his eyes. He also had a feeling that although he couldn't put his finger on it, he somehow knew too much. If that were true, the man or men who had killed Johnny couldn't afford to take a chance. He'd be the next one on their list.

Jones picked up his hat from the table by the outer door. "Can I drop you somewhere, Smith?"

"Thanks," the gambler told him. "But I've my car outside. I—" He stopped short as the wail of a baby filled the hall.

The group, Craig included, stood in silence, watching the door of the room from which the wail had issued.

A few moments later a nurse came out into the hall.

"It's a boy," she told them. "Premature—brought on by the shock of the tragic death of Mr. Wallace. But a large and healthy boy."

"Wallace had been married how long?" Craig asked.

"Seven months," Smith told him quietly.

Mrs. Durham stepped out of another door and brushed past them into the outer hall. Tears streamed openly down her cheeks to her sable wrap. The silver-haired gambler felt something small and crisp pressed into his fingers as she passed.

Jones left him at the curbing. Mrs. Durham, too, had her own car waiting. Smith watched a footman help her in, then climb back beside the chauffeur.

Sam Eagan drove up with Silent's car.

"Back to the place, Sam" Smith told him. "I'll ride in front with you."

He waited for two blocks, then unfolded the pasteboard in his hand and held it under the dash light. It was an engraved card bearing the name of Mrs. Alvin Durham. On the back of it was scrawled:

> *Please come to see me tonight. I must talk to someone whom I can trust. Ex-Senator Wallace was murdered. I know the man who brought about his death.*

◆

SILENT SMITH sat on the edge of his desk. He looked somehow older and grayer than either Bill Morrow or Sam Eagan had ever seen him before.

"And those are the facts of the case," he told them. "A motion picture, mirrors—whatever it was, the illusion was clever. And if the purported spirit of Sarah Wallace could have told me how and where I met my own Martha, I'll be damned if I might not have fallen for the gag!"

Eagan asked, "It was the voice of Mrs. Wallace?"

"Similar," the gambler admitted. "But as I recall, her ghost had a lot more schooling than Sarah ever had. Of course, Johnny would never admit it after he'd made his money, but Sarah always talked with a Hester Street accent."

"Then why," Bill Morrow demanded, "did Wallace fall for the gag? Couldn't he tell his own wife's voice?"

Smith touched his ear. "Johnny was hard of hearing. He wore a bone induction hearing aid. I don't know much about such matters, but I imagine that might distort sound slightly." He looked at his two boys. "I am the only one who would be apt to notice that, and

I've a hunch it put me on the spot."

Eagan smiled. "We're not leaving you tonight, Chief. In fact, not until this thing is settled. Craig is right in one thing: this was murder for profit!"

"But who profits," Smith demanded, "except Johnny's legal wife and heir? Believe it or not, Lazarus impressed me as being sincere. He actually thought he materialized that spirit!"

Bill Morrow smiled briefly. "But you can't run even a Paradise without any cash, Chief. The money has to come from somewhere. Could this Lazarus be marrying rich old men off to young dames, then splitting the estates with the girls?"

"I thought of that, Bill" Smith said wryly. "But no other recently married wealthy man that I know of has died under suspicious circumstances. At least, not lately." He lighted one of his long, slim panatellas. "However, it's a possibility. That's why I've sent for Jim."

As other wealthy men collected Ming pottery, chorus girls or stamps, Silent Smith collected boys—boys without homes or parents. Smith took them from the slums and gave them the chance in life that he, himself, had never had. Smith called it common sense philanthropy, and asked for no return other than that they keep their noses clean in whatever life work they might choose. It had paid big dividends. His boys gave him a finger on the pulse of almost every type of enterprise in New York. Jim Jackson was one of his boys, and now a star newspaper man. They called him the man with the camera mind—he never forgot a printed fact.

"What do you know, Jim," Smith asked as Jackson walked in the door, "about the girl who married Johnny Wallace?"

Jackson turned the mental pages until he found the one he sought. "The bride was born in Binghamton, N. Y. Attended local grade and high school. Family in modest circumstances but well thought of. She had an unfortunate love affair with a local youth who married another girl. She came to New York, met Wallace on a bench in Central Park and—on the rebound, as I take it—married him one week later."

"And Mrs. Alvin Durham? Know anything about her, Jim?"

The reporter shuffld his mental pages. "Yes. Her name was Thomas. She came from the west—Colorado, I believe. She met old Durham—"

"On another park bence?" Morrow scoffed.

"No. She was a registered nurse," Jackson grinned. "She went on the the Durham case one week and married him the next. The old man had an heir, and died peacefully and full of honor about four months after the child was born. Durham was crazy about his girl bride, too. He tried to get us to print some nonsense about his dead wife having sent her to him."

Smith said, "That's it!" He picked up his expensive fawn beaver from his desk, shaped it on his head, and nodded to Sam again. "You come with me, Sam. It may not be good etiquette, but I'm invited. We're going to pay an early morning call on Mrs. Durham."

THE address on the card was in the East Seventies, not far from the Wallace apartment. An old, gray stone, three-story mansion, wedged in between two towering apartment hotels, the Durham home looked squat and somehow sinister in the early morning light.

Smith reached for the bell, but didn't ring it. His sharp eyes had noticed that the door was ajar.

A worried frown knitted his forehead. He said, "That's funny, Sam."

Standing well to one side, he pushed the door still farther open. An oldfashioned drop chandelier burned dimly, but there was no one in the inner hall. A rush of cold air swept down the staircase that led to a dark second floor. The house held the solemn hush peculiar to untenanted houses—and those tenanted by the dead.

"I don't like this, Chief," Sam Eagan told him. "This smells like a trap to me."

Smith agreed with the younger man, tersely. "Perhaps something's already happened to young Mrs. Durham. She had reason to be frightened if what she wrote on her card was true. Ring the bell, Sam."

The bell rang loud and long, and echoed through the house. There was no response.

Smith stepped inside the hall and called: "Hello! Mrs. Durham. This is Smith!"

Eagan joined him in the hall, his gun in his hand. He stood, staring at a slight bulge in the drawn velvet drapes that closed off what could be either a library or parlor.

Smith went on ahead, personal safety forgotten in his concern for the girl. "Let's look upstairs in the nursery first, Sam. If she's here at all, she should be there."

He started up the stairs. As his foot touched the second step there was a 'pop,' as of an opened bottle of champagne, or the spit of a muffled gun. The velvet drape twitched slightly and Smith's hat flew off of his head.

"Drop, Sam! Drop!" he warned. "We *have* walked into a trap!"

Eagan dropped, firing twice at the bulge in the curtain as he fell. The bulge grew more pronounced. Silence followed. Eagan inched his way along the floor until he could reach the tasseled pull-rope. He jerked it savagely.

"Come out of there!" he ordered.

The body of a girl pitched from the swirling drapes and fell forward. It was Mrs. Durham—and she was dead!

The gun dropped from Eagan's hand. His lips were ashen. Smith got up off the stairs, picked up his own hat, and examined it closely. It was undamaged, he discovered. He raised one hand. A black silk thread ran head-high from the wall to the drape. Smith followed it to its source. A ten cent mouse trap with its wire spring sprung upon a 'cap' dangled from the other end.

Smith said, "Clever. Very clever." But his face was as gray as his hair. He knew how the story would sound in court.

He lighted a long, slim panatella absently, then snuffed it out and knelt by the dead girl.

Eagan found his voice. "I wouldn't have, Chief, not for worlds. But how was I to know? I thought—" He broke off with a gulp, and leaned against the wall, mopping at his forehead.

Smith laid the back of his hand against the dead girl's cheek. The flesh was cold. She had died shortly after leaving the Wallace apartment. *Rigor mortis* enough had set in to prop her on her feet when she'd been placed behind the drape.

He said: "Don't take it so hard, Sam. Don't worry. It wasn't your shots that killed the girl. She's been dead for at least a couple of hours."

But he couldn't keep the worry from his own voice. He knew that he had to call Craig. And he knew what Craig would say.

GALLEY FOUR

The Fox Goes Mad

IT WAS eight o'clock in the morning. The grand concourse of Grand Central was filled with a surging, incoming, human tide of sleepy-eyed commuters. Silent Smith, his topcoat turned up to hide the wing collar and white tie of the evening dress he still wore, breasted the human tide to buy the latest paper.

The headlines told the story:

**EX U. S. SENATOR DIES;
YOUNG WIDOW MURDERED;
DURHAM HEIR KIDNAPPED**

Smith scanned the stories briefly, handed the paper to Sam Eagan, and turned to breast the crowd again. There was little in the paper that they didn't know. It was more important to Smith that he think. That was why he had turned in to the station on his way back to the Place. He always thought best in a crowd.

The city was born in his blood; quiet bothered him and dulled his mind. He thought best with the leather-lunged bellow of newsboys in his ears, with every man's will against his, his slim, muscled body pushing, buffeting, shoving—fighting for existence, as he had fought for every one of his sixty years on Broadway. He forced his way through the crowd with Craig's last words ringing in his ears:

"All right. So we'll admit, between the three of us, just for the sake of argument that you aren't tied up in this, Smith. Personally, I think you are. You claim you had nothing to do with the deaths of Wallace or Mrs. Durham, or the disappearance of the baby. You claim, as I claim, this is murder for profit. All right. You bring in the killer, or the killers, Smith, and bring back that baby unharmed, or so help me, Hannah, *I'll burn both you and Sam!* There isn't a judge or jury in the world who'll believe you once I turn on the heat. You either deliver, soon—or you'll walk the last mile of your life thirty miles up the river from Broadway!"

It had been, for Craig, a long speech. And he could contort the facts as he had promised that he would. Still, Smith bore him no resentment. Unfortunately, it left him in between. The murder for profit crowd were already after his skin—the frame in the Durham home proved that. He had to strike back, and fast—but at whom? Craig had sweated Lazarus, Leightner, and Ronaldo, and had got nothing out of any of them. Now it was up to him.

Where to start? Just what was the racket? How was the racket worked? Were Lazarus, Leightner, and perhaps Ronaldo, heads or minor figures? Where did they cut into the money and how? Were the girls partners or victims? Or was he on the wrong track entirely? Had Johnny Wallace been killed because of a personal motive, and Mrs. Durham later killed and her baby made away with because she knew to much? The records proved that no other recently-married wealthy man had died. Several had married young brides, but all were living happily.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, sir." The voice was low, throaty. It was also young and feminine, and choked with tears.

"That's quite all right." Smith glanced briefly at the girl standing by the information desk, and over whose shabby traveling bag he'd almost fallen. In that one brief glance, before he pushed on against the crowd, Smith saw enough to interest him. The girl was young, crying, beautiful, blonde—obviously a country girl; she carried a cheap purse with the scroll initials H. H. on the purse flap. Life, he thought, was full of tragedy. God knew what hers was. Normally, he would have stopped and asked if he could help; but now he had no time. He was racing time. Hard pushed by the screaming papers, Craig might at any moment throw Sam and himself to the lions.

The aged gambler continued to breast the crowd. He reached the in-coming train gate, and allowed himself to be washed back with the tide headed for the Times Square shuttle ramp. He noted, absently relieved, that the crying girl was no longer alone. She was engaged in an animated conversation with a dowdy but motherly-looking white-haired woman.

Probably one of the women from the Traveler's Aid, Silent thought.

Then the woman picked up the girl's shabby bag, and started down the shuttle ramp with her, one arm around her waist. As she turned, Smith saw the women's face.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he muttered. He dug in his heels and stopped short.

"Did you see that, Chief? Did you see that?" It was Sam Eagan, almost shouting in his ears.

"I did," Smith told his crisply. His usually mild blue eyes were glittering like chilled dagger points. "And so help me, Sam, I've got the whole thing now—including Mr. Big."

He launched himself into the stream again. "Come on. We've got to trail Bessie Thompkins and that girl. I've got to know where Bessie is taking her. If it's where I think it is—"

His voice trailed off as he elbowed his way through the crowded subway tunnel, leaving Eagan far behind. He reached the shuttle level just in time to see the woman and the girl board the waiting train for Times Square. The warning bell rang, and Smith shoved for the nearest, already closing door. He almost made it—but not quite. As his hand reached for the rubber cushion of the door to shove it back, a hoarse voice grated in his ear: "Oh, no you don't!"

Smith tried to turn. A hard fist dug into his kidney, and involuntarily he doubled in pain, crashing his face into the train door. Then a blackjack, swung in a short, vicious, underhand arc out of the sight of the crowd, sent him to the pavement, fighting hard for consciousness—and failing. The last he heard was the hoarse voice rasping: "Back. Back. Give him air. There's a guy just fainted here. Pull him back from the tracks. I'll go get a doctor."

The rasping voice faded. There was the familiar click of locking doors, a distant jangle of bells, the squeak and grind of the shuttle wheels as the train got underway. Then everything blacked-out completely. . . .

◆

THE baby they had given her to care for cooed happily as he clutched at his bare, waving toes. The girl smiled through her tears, thinking of her own child, still unborn.

The room was large and comfortably furnished. Except that this was a place called Long Island, the girl had no idea where she was. At first she had been frightened: a girl hears so many stories about New York. But she wasn't frightened now, only heart-sick. But everyone had been so kind. . . .

She wiped the baby's mouth with his bib, stood up and raised her arms above her head, her golden hair cascading down her back in a yellow water-fall. She was dressed in a simple negligee that 'Mother' Bessie had brought her. In the closet of the room were several smart, new dresses, and a chic, expensive evening gown. She had been told that she must not worry. Somehow, someway, the Lord would solve her problem.

Hilda Halmquist walked to the open window and looked out. Her new home was a county estate, with large, rolling grounds—a religious institution; she could tell that by the songs. Every night there was a meeting, and the sweet, familiar hymns rose up to her window. Still, she hadn't been preached at.

Tears started from her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. It was one thing to tell her not to worry, but not to worry was another thing. She fingered the scroll H. H. on her purse, then counted her money—a dollar and ten cents on which to support two lives in the long months still to come. . . .

She sat back on the bed with the baby, her tears falling freely now. She had made such a mess of her life. What in Heaven's name was she going to do? These people, kind as they were, couldn't take care of her forever. She had to do something for herself.

The door of her room opened slowly. It was 'Mother' Bessie, her usual sweet smile on her face. She sat down on the bed with the girl, and Hilda sobbed on the ample, comforting bosom.

"Now, now," the woman soothed. "You mustn't cry like this, dear. I know how you feel. But I think I've solved your problem."

The girl sat up, shaking curls and tears from her eyes. "You do?" she asked breathlessly.

"I do," the older woman told her. She paused. "Of course, we both realize that you can't think only of yourself."

"Oh no, of course not," the girl agreed.

"And at first, my suggestion may seem distasteful to you. But every child has a right to a name. And I've just learned of an enormously wealthy, dear man who—"

The woman's voice droned on. The two men outside the door listened closely.

"Bessie," one of them whispered, "could sell snow in Alaska."

"Shh." The man at the key-hole quieted him. "The little blonde wren is falling hard for her line."

"Why shouldn't she?" the other man scoffed. "Shes' in a jam, and Bessie's selling her an out. Once she's hooked, well—that's why this racket's perfect. She doesn't dare squawk."

"None of them will squawk." The voice was cold. "Not after what happened to Durham and her brat. That's what hooks 'em in the first place. They're all thinking of their babies."

"And that guy Silent Smith—"

"Forget him. Our top man is just as smart as he is. Besides, Smith can't last forever. If Craig doesn't burn him, he's old enough to die a natural death." The man chuckled. "Or even come to Paradise and marry himself a nice bride. I hear that those lumps I gave him softened him up plenty. Our top man was telling me that I must have bust Smith's ear drums, because the old goat had to buy himself a hearing aid like Wallace wore."

◆

THROUGH the open French window that led out to the setback, forty floors above Broadway, the roar of traffic came to him clearly at his

TOPS 'EM ALL!
Pepsi-Cola
5¢
BIGGER BETTER
"FINER FLAVOR"
"12 OUNCE BOTTLE"
Pepsi-Cola is made only by Pepsi-Cola Company, Long Island City, N. Y. Bottled locally by authorized bottlers.

desk. The tick of the clock on the opposite wall was plain, too. The silver-haired gambler put the moulded plug of the hearing aid into his ear and turned the rheostat switch of the receiver. The roar of traffic became more pronounced, and the tick of the clock uncomfortably louder.

Smith smiled. "A clever invention, this."

The phone on his desk rang, and lifting it produced Captain Craig's belligerent voice.

"Twenty-four hours more, Smith," he warned. "I've played ball with you as long as I intend to. After that I'm going before the Grand Jury and ask them to vote True Bills against you and Sam Eagan. The papers are screaming for my scalp."

"But I was hurt, I've been sick," Smith protested meekly.

"I don't care what you've been," Craig told him. "Either you come clean and confess, or bring me the killer and the Durham baby or you'll be a lot sicker."

The connection banged closed on the other end. The gambler hung up his own receiver, whistling softly. Twenty four hours should be enough. He dialed the number of the Acme Independent Film Exchange, asked two crisp questions and hung up.

"Yes? Come in," he called in answer to a loud rapping on the office door. It was Bill Morrow, Sam Eagan, and the silver-haired gambler's one-time boyhood friend Alverdez Ronaldo.

"You wanted to see us, Chief?" Morrow asked.

"Yes," Smith nodded, "I do." He fiddled impatiently with the switch of his hearing aid. It made everything too loud. "And you too, Ronaldo. After all, you're one of my oldest friends, even if I haven't approved of a lot of things that you've done."

The three men looked at the gambler. He had refused all medical aid, but in the last few days he seemed to have aged years. He looked old and tired and shrunken. Only the four carat, square cut diamond in his tie was the same.

"I've sent for Harmon Jones to discuss a legal paper I wish drawn, and I wanted both of you boys and Ronaldo to be present." He asked, without much interest: "There's been no word of the girl or Bessie Thompkins?"

"None, Chief," Eagan said. "The boys have combed New York."

"And you," Smith asked Morrow, "have talked to young Mrs. Wallace?"

"Yeah." The younger man's face was grim. "I can't understand her, Chief. The minute I ask a leading question she grabs for her baby, clams up, and begins to cry."

"Young mothers," Smith told him gently, "are strange creatures." He paused, then continued, his voice quivering a trifle, "I guess we're in over our heads this time, boys. I—I'm about ready to back down and believe that it was Sarah Wallace's spirit that Johnny followed out of the window of his apartment!"

Alverdez Ronaldo nodded sagely. Morrow and Eagan stared at each other, shocked.

"Of course," the aged gambler admitted, "that doesn't explain the murder of young Mrs. Durham, or the disappearance of her baby. But, perhaps, it was just a snatch." He looked at Eagan. "We didn't kill her, and we haven't got the baby, Sam. Perhaps we should stand trial. There's the chance a jury *might* believe our story."

The younger man turned away, obviously disgusted.

Smith picked up the silver-framed picture of his wife, stared at it. "I know you boys are shocked," he told them. "But, after all, I'm an old man. I guess that last beating that I took un-nerved me."

Thurman rapped lightly on the door. "They's a Mister Harmon Jones out heah to see you, Mister Smith."

Smith fumbled with his hearing aid. "Eh?"

Eagan opened the door. "Come in, Mr. Jones."

The lawyer strode into the office briskly and laid his bulging brief case on Smith's desk. "Well, Silent, what is this?" he asked. "I heard you'd been knocked around a bit, but frankly, you look like hell."

"I feel that way," Smith admitted. "That's why I sent for you. I want to draw up a will."

A SHOCKED, awkward silence followed. Smith continued: "Now that Johnny is gone. Alverdez and I are all that are left of the old crowd who fought our way up out of the old East Side." His voice dropped until it was barely audible. "When a man's in the trouble that I am, and sees his old friends begin to drop away, he begins to think of death."

"And you want me to draw up a will? Jones asked.

The silver-haired gambler nodded. "That's right, Harmon." He fumbled some papers from his desk. "I have a rough draft drawn up here I want you to look over and re-draft in proper form. It will be a task, I warn you. I have about fifteen million dollars to dispose of."

Ronaldo formed a temple with his fingers. The lawyer whistled shrilly. He said, admiringly: "I had no idea you were that well fixed."

"Few people have," Smith admitted. He smiled at Morrow and Eagan. "I'm leaving my Casino, my good will, and a half a million apiece to you boys. I trust you to carry on the Place fairly and honestly as I have always done."

"But, Chief!" Morrow protested.

Smith ignored him to turn to Ronaldo. "And I'm leaving you a substantial sum for old time's sake, Alverdez. After all, you were my Martha's second cousin."

Ronaldo smiled smugly. "I—I don't know what to say, Silent."

Harmon Jones looked up from the roughly-drafted will that Smith had scrawled on several sheets of paper. "You seem to have omitted the one most important thing, Silent—the chief beneficiary's name."

The gambler picked up his wife's picture again, and stared at it earnestly before he spoke. "That's what worries me. I've fought hard for my money, but I've no heir. Martha and I only had the one boy, and he died somewhere in France."

"You know what I think," Ronaldo suggested suavely. "I think you ought to do as Johnny did, as I intend to do—remarry. That way, it is possible for you to leave a child who will carry on your name."

Smith shrugged, "It's an idea." He put his wife's picture back on his desk. "But we're taking up Harmon's time, and he's a busy man. You draw up the will with what bequests I have noted, Harmon, and we'll discuss the chief beneficiary again."

"Fair enough."

Silent Smith smiled. "And I'm not figuring on dying, so there's no hurry." He added, rather wistfully, "You don't suppose, do you, that there *could* be anything to spiritualism? Any way that I *could* ask Martha's advice?"

"Rot! You're being senile, Silent." The lawyer glowered at Ronaldo. "And, if I were you, I don't think that I'd let Ronaldo tempt me into fooling around that fake medium's Paradise. As far as I'm concerned, both Lazarus and spiritualism are a fraud." He strode to the door, smiling pleasantly in parting. "But, it could be I'm wrong. Maybe there *is* something to it."

"You believe in spiritualism, though, don't you, Alverdez?" Smith asked.

"I do," the other man replied. "Look," he tempted. "Why don't you come out to Paradise with me tonight?"

"Well, I—I might," the silver-haired gambler considered.

The other man licked again at his too full lips. "Many of the faithful, men as old as you and I, have married girls to whom they were guided by the spirit world. In fact," he confided, "just last night, my own spirit world control told me that very shortly there would come into my life a blond girl whose initials are H.H."

Sam Eagan sat up quickly. He glanced at his Chief. Smith was fumbling with the dial of his hearing aid, and didn't seem to have heard what Ronaldo said. But his lips were a straight, thin line.

"Look, Sam," Bill Morrow whispered tersely in Eagan's ear. "I don't like to say this, but that clipping the chief took the other day had unsettled his mind. Whether he wants one or not, let's get a doctor. The old man has gone crazy."

"Yeah." Eagan exhaled deeply in relief. "Sure. The old man has gone crazy—crazy like a fox!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Ghosts in the Night

THE mansion was old. It had been a part of a multi-millionaire's estate before Lazarus had bought it for back taxes and turned it into Paradise.

The moon was a slim silver crescent in a jet black sky that held no stars. The sound of music filled the air; soft lights gleamed through tall and stately windows.

Skeeter lit a cigarette, using the match flare to make certain that his portable projector was loaded and ready to roll.

"Some racket, eh, Ranny?" he rasped.

"The suckers like it," the man working in the dark with him replied stolidly. He lifted the long extension of a hand microphone over a small arborvitae, so it could be moved easily from one window to another. "Personally, I don't like Ronaldo bringing Silent Smith out here. This is the second time. Last night, and again tonight."

Skeeter shrugged. "Those lumps I give him at Grand Central may have softened up his mind."

"The big shot think so?"

"Well, he isn't certain of him yet. He—"

There was a swift movement in the darkness behind him, which Skeeter didn't hear. He merely stopped talking, and crumpled to the ground.

Ranny was puzzled. He turned around, the bridge of his nose on a level with the barrel of the .45 that had just stretched Skeeter on the ground.

"Dummy up!" Sam Eagan told him. "Don't even chirp. It might be fatal if you do. We're changing ghosts tonight and the new cast has arrived." He ordered, "Turn around!"

The gunman did. Eagan took the microphone from his hand. Then he swung the gun barrel, hard.

THE DARKNESS and the chirping crickets were getting on Bill Morrow's nerves. He made certain that the clip in his gun was full, then got out of the car, leaving the motor idling.

"And just where do you think you're going, chauffeur?" The hard-faced parking-lot attendant stopped him.

Morrow pointed at Paradise. "Why—just having a look around."

"Oh no," the attendant shook his head. "Back to your car, sonny. Lazarus don't like strangers to prowl around the grounds when a meetin's in progress."

"Afraid they'll frighten the spirits away?"

"Perhaps." The attendant's voice was frankly suspicious. He raised the circle of his flash light from the ground to flood the other man's face wtih light. "Who are you?"

"A fool," Morrow told him. "But I work for a smart fellow. His name is Silent Smith."

Morrow's left fist, traveling in a short-arm blow that didn't move five inches, planted itself wrist deep in the hood's solar-plexus. Then Morrow slammed with the butt end of his gun, Smith's orders having been plain: "Put as many of them out of commission as you can before the pay-off—without noise."

Morrow dragged the man back into the bushes, tied his wrists and ankles, shoved a gag into his mouth, and tapped him again, just to be sure. Then he resumed his stroll in the shadows.

Through one of the open first-floor windows, he could see into the meeting hall. It was filled with singing disciples of the master. Morrow saw Smith sitting in the circle of the faithful, in the front of the hall. His hair was a gleaming, silver sheen in the soft light, his eyes mild and blue. A beatific expression lighted his face, making it look strangely young as he lifted his voice with the others in song.

Morrow turned back towards the car. For the first time in days, he was smiling.

THE HYMN had ended. Smith nodded to several acquaintances he'd made the previous night, noting with satisfaction that there were about a hundred eager, if misguided, souls inside the converted ball-room, besides the twenty of the faithful ring.

"Nice crowd." He smiled at Ronaldo.

The lights dimmed slightly. Lazarus strode into the hall, through the arched doorway at the rear. All stood to pay him tribute as he moved through the flock to his chair in the exact center of the faithful circle.

He noticed Smith and smiled. "Glad to have you with us again tonight."

"I'm glad to be here," the silver-haired gambler told him truthfully. He knew he was gambling on long odds, but the deck was shuffled now.

Lazarus made his usual request for silence, for open minds. Smith studied his face as he talked. Unless the man had a better poker face than he had ever seen before, Lazarus was stupidly sincere.

"Tonight will be my night," Ronaldo panted in Smith's ear. "Last night my control could not get through to tell me about the blond girl. But tonight—"

Smith wondered if Ronaldo really thought he was fooling him; wondered, too, if he was fooling Ronaldo.

The lights were out completely, save for the ghastly green spot light that shone on the medium's face. The faithful sat hopefully silent, scarcely daring to breathe. One never knew in Paradise what the next manifestation might be. A ghostly tom-tom began to throb.

Smith smiled wryly in the dark. Sam and the actress he had hired to play the voice were going to put on a good show.

A woman's voice moaned, coming from everywhere and nowhere. A faint, red glow began to grow in one corner of the hall. It wavered, became stronger, grew into the radiant, if misty, figure of a woman.

"Silent," the misty figure called. "Silent Smith, are you here? Silent, can you hear me?"

Smith felt Ronaldo's hand, clasping his, grow tense. Silent admitted he was present, that he could hear the voice, and asked: "That you, Martha? Really you?"

Ronaldo's eyes glowered. "This is very funny," he began. "You—"

A dozen angry voices bade him be quiet.

"Of course it is. Don't you know your own Martha, Silent?" The voice was sweet and throaty, and so like the voice of his dead wife that Smith marveled at the deception.

Then, his lips a thin line in the dark, the gambler forced himself to play the hand he'd dealt. He admitted, when the figure asked him, that he was lonely; protested when the figure suggested that he marry; gave his promise that he would marry, if his dead wife could suggest a girl who would be acceptable to her.

The misty figure played their trump card. "I can suggest a girl. Just mount the stairs of Paradise. The Paradise you now are in. In a room on the top floor of the building you will find a girl with golden hair whose initials are H.H. You must marry this girl, Silent. Tonight. You must—"

The figure stopped, and faded abruptly. There was a brief struggle and an outcry just outside of one of the windows. Then the lights came on suddenly, and all eyes swung to Smith as he leaped up on a chair. He was calling for a showdown—and the next few seconds would decide the hand.

His blue eyes blazed fanatically. "The other world has spoken." He jumped down from the chair, shook off Ronaldo's restraining hands and started for the stairway at the far end of the hall. "Join me. Join me, all ye faithful in my search of Paradise."

It was phony and corny as hell. But it worked, as the gambler had known it would. A hundred voices shouted "Hallelujah!" and an eager, jostling crowd of men and women fell into step behind him.

◆

A HARD-FACED attendant shook Lazarus out of his trance, and whispered tersely in his ear. The medium looked blank. He gasped: "Here? Here in Paradise? Why—but it's never happened before!"

At the top of the first flight of stairs, two grim-eyed hoodlums tried to stop Smith, but he pushed past.

Both guards reached for their shoulder guns, hesitated for one brief moment, undecided—and were swept aside by the eager, wide-eyed faithful as they crowded after Smith. A tricked color film, a clever Broadway character actress, and a hundred shouting fanatics in search of a miracle had accomplished what Smith had known a police raiding squad or a dozen of his own boys would have failed to do.

"Where's Leightner?" one of the guards demanded.

"I don't know," the other scowled. "He went to answer a phone call. Me, I'm getting out of here. Something's gone wrong?"

The shouting, hysterical mob found the girl in the first upstairs room that they entered. The blonde girl looked bewildered and pathetically young. A six months old, boy baby—the kidnaped Harmon child—cooed at them from the bed.

"Look, little sister," Smith told her briefly. "You don't know me, but I'm here to help you out. Pick up that baby on the bed and take my arm."

The girl began to sob, but she did as she was told.

"Trust me," Smith told her. "You can." He took the baby from her arms. "Keep right beside me. We're going to have to leave here now—and leave here fast!"

The silver-haired gambler made certain that he and the girl were in the center of the shouting faithful, made even more hysterical by the miracle they had witnessed. Smith, with the girl on his arm, made a painfully slow return to the ground floor, momentarily expecting a bullet in his back. He had bet a weak hand to the limit, and any moment the joker might fall. He turned right sharply out of the crowd at the outer door, straight-arming the blazing-eyed medium who stood there.

The shouting faithful fell back, puzzled. Bill Morrow, a heavy automatic in his hand, was waiting with the car. So far everything had clicked with one, two, three precision.

Smith thrust the baby back into the arms of the girl as he helped her into the car. "Get down on the floor!" he ordered.

His warning came just in time. There was the sharp crack of a rifle from a second story window, and a singing pellet of lead dug into the bullet-proof glass, an eighth of an inch from the gambler's head. It was followed by a fusillade of screaming lead.

Smith stepped calmly into the car, calling: "Sam! Jane! Jim!"

Eagan appeared from a corner of the house. Blood streamed from a deep cut in his face; his gun was in his hand.

He shouted, "Drive! Drive like mad!" to Morrow as he made a leap for the running board of the moving car. "Jane and Jim scrammed out the side road in the other car!"

The screaming of the foolish faithful on the porch turned into frenzied prayers. A sub-machine began to chatter on a balcony just above their heads.

"Stop them! Stop that car!" the unseen gunman ordered. "Smith's made fools of us! That wasn't Skeeter running the machine tonight. It was Sam Eagan. And Smith has the Durham baby and the dame!"

Silent saw Sam Eagan empty his gun at the belches of flame. "Nuts to you, Leightner!" he yelled. "Come up and see us sometime!"

CHAPTER SIX

Paradise Lost

THE bullet-riddled car jerked to a stop before the towering skyscraper that housed Silent Smith's Casino and pent house. Smith handed the Durham baby back to the blonde girl after he helped her from the car.

She sobbed, as she had sobbed continuously through the long ride. "They'll kill me. They'll kill my baby now. They told me—"

"No." Smith shook his head. "I don't think they will."

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He glanced briefly at the stream of headlights flooding past the building. "But they ought not to be far behind us."

Once upstairs in his pent-house he had Sam Eagan take the girl and baby into another room. Then, leaving the outer door open, Smith, Eagan and Morrow sat down to wait. Their wait wasn't long.

The elevator stopped just outside the door. Eagan and Morrow made certain that the clips in their guns were full, but the aged gambler's only weapon was the grim smile on his face. In all his years on Broadway, he had never carried a gun because a smart man didn't need one.

Alverdez Ronaldo strode into the apartment. His deep-set, pig-like eyes were red with fury. He shook the gun in his hand at Smith.

"Where's the girl?" he demanded. "You knew I wanted her. You tricked her away from me! You weren't any more fooled by the spirits than I was. You—"

Smith got up from his chair, wrenched the gun from the other man's hand, and slapped his face.

"And you," he told him, "are nothing but a heel. You saw through the whole thing from the start. You could have saved Johnny's life, but you didn't. You were waiting for the Lazarus crowd to send you a wife." He slapped him into the nearest chair. "Sit down and shut up! We're holding a séance ourselves. We're waiting for the master mind of the spirit world to appear."

Ronaldo collapsed in the chair. The elevator stopped outside the door again, and Lazarus entered. His fanatical eyes blazed fiercer than Smith had ever seen them. Tony Leightner followed right behind him, a sub-machine gun in his hands.

"I wouldn't pull that trip, if I were you, Tony," Smith told him calmly. "Both Bill and Sam are good shots."

Behind Leightner were four of his boys, Skeeter and Ranny wearing Sam Eagan's gun barrel autograph.

The one-time big shot nodded. "I knew what I was walking into. And I know why you didn't go to Centre Street. You knew that, even with the girl and Durham kid in your possession, Craig would never believe your fantastic story. He'd think that you were crawling. You want a confession from me. But you're not going to get it. I want that blonde babe and the Durham kid. And if I don't get them, I start shooting."

He raised the sub-machine gun just as the phone rang. "Answer that," he ordered Smith. "And tell me who it is."

The voice on the wire was clear. "Hello. That you, Silent? This is Harmon Jones calling from downstairs."

"Tell him to come up," Leightner scowled.

"Come up," Smith said into the phone.

They waited in terse, armed silence until the elevator stopped for the third time outside the door. The lawyer took in the scene with one quick glance and started to back out.

◆

LEIGHTNER motioned him over beside Smith, Morow and Eagan with his gun. "No one leaves here until I get the girl."

"What girl?" Jones demanded of Smith.

"My future bride," Smith told him dryly. "I was guided to her by my dead wife's spirit." He shrugged. "Not having been in Paradise, you wouldn't know."

Leightner scowled. "Okay. Let's drop the comedy."

"Fine," Smith agreed. "Let's all let down our hair. You had a good racket while it lasted, but it's over. It was based on a cardinal human weakness: loneliness. I thought at first that Ronaldo might be in the racket, but he wasn't. He was just another sucker."

Leightner's finger tightened on his gun trip. He said: "We're wasting time."

"We've lots of it, some of us," Smith told him. "One thing I'd like to know is where you picked up Lazarus. He was a good front for your game. The man is as insane as he is sincere. He actually believed that he was materializing those visions the faithful saw."

"I did," the medium maintained. "I do."

The silver-haired gambler said dryly, "Your visions were technicolor motion pictures, with an infra-red attachment cut in to the circuit to eliminate the glare of light that comes from an ordinary projector. I know. I had a picture made by Acme. And the feminine voices of your spirits were always Bessie Thompkins, using information that the master mind had culled from the lives of his prospective suckers."

Leightner sneered. "You seem to know a lot."

"I do," Smith admitted. "I know that there's a flaw in every something-for-nothing proposition. But it wasn't until I realized how you got your girls that my eyes were really opened. Young Mrs. Wallace is a lady. So was Mrs. Durham. So is the child to whom I'm going to lend my name tonight. The girls were all sweet, wholesome kids who had made the very human mistake of loving one man too well."

Sam Eagan swore. Heedless of the machine gun in Leightner's hands, he started forward. The aged gambler waved him back.

"Hold it. I'm not finished, Sam. And I want this to be heard. Murder was not premeditated when the racket was conceived. Once a girl had married an old man, and had borne him what the old man thought was his own child, the master-mind could afford to wait for him to die a natural death. They only married girls to millionaires."

"But the girls," Morrow puzzled, "—how did the gang control them once they were married?"

"Through their children," Smith said quietly. "They threatened to kill their baby if they talked or refused to hand over the estate. They did kill Mrs. Durham, as an example, and then tried to frame it on Sam and me."

"A filthy scheme," Jones scowled. "But clever."

"And simple," the gambler agreed. "They only slipped once. That was in marrying Mrs. Wallace to Johnny. Johnny was a lonely, sentimental old man, but he wasn't a fool. That's why they had to kill him. Even the master mind couldn't explain how Johnny's young wife could bear him an heir when they had only been married for seven months. Actually, the baby wasn't premature. The mother bribed the nurse to say so."

"Quite a story, Smith," Jones smiled. "And clever on your part to unravel it the way you have." He drew a heavy automatic from a shoulder holster, and pressed it against the gambler's spine.

"But why go on? Suppose you tell us where the girl and baby are. Right now they're the weak spots in our armor."

Bill Morrow gasped. "Good God! He's one of them!"

"One of them?" Smith smiled. "Give every devil his due—Harmon Jones is the master mind! I knew it as soon as I saw Bessie pick up that girl down in Grand Central. Jones was the only lawyer on the Street who would take her case when she was mixed up in a messy case. Jones not only took her case, but he sprung her. Because Bessie has a way with girls, and he'd already figured out this racket."

"That's right," the lawyer nodded grimly. "And I intend to go on with the racket." He smiled, sarcastically. "Lazarus can tell the faithful that you were a bunch of devils who carried off the prize bride. The girl and child will disappear."

He nodded almost pleasantly at Smith. "Your millions are as good as any other sucker's. Now, they'll go to the State."

"The State?" Smith asked him evenly.

Harmon Jones smiled thinly. "That's right. We outnumber you, six guns to two. Before we leave here—once we have the girl and baby, whom I strongly suspect are on the premises—we're going to shut your mouths. And I think we can get clear."

The French doors to the pent-house set-back terrace opened. A curt voice contradicted: "I don't think you can. Drop those guns! Drop them fast!"

"It's Craig—and his whole squad!" Leightner swore, then fired.

SMITH twisted away from the gun held at his spine, felt a streak of flame burn a flesh wound through his side as he dove at Leightner's knees.

Craig and Eagan both got Jones with their first shots. Leightner had tried, in vain, to turn his gun barrel down as he was falling. Morrow shot him through the head. Craig's men got Skeeter and Ranny in the first volley fired. The two other gunmen threw up their hands.

Ronaldo still sat, trembling, in his chair. Lazarus, miraculously unharmed, was kneeling, praying.

Silent Smith got off his knees and dusted ruefully at the razor-edged crease of his trousers. "I'm getting too old for things like this."

Craig's face was more apoplectically purple than usual. The burly homicide captain shook his huge fist in Smith's face. "I'll 'old' you. What do you mean by having your colored boy call me up and tell me to come over to your pent-house? He said you were ready to confess that you had killed Wallace and Mrs. Alvin Durham, and kidnaped the baby." He added, spluttering in impotent fury, "He said I had to wait out on the set-back with my men—because until you had confessed, you were ashamed to face me!"

"Did Thurman tell you that?"

"You're damn right he did," Craig moaned. The big captain collapsed into a chair, his head between his hands. "And I was so certain it was true—"

"Yes—"

"That I gave it to the papers."

Smith said, "How cute."

But the incident was finished, or almost so, as far as the gambler was concerned. "You—" he motioned Eagan to the door behind which the young blonde girl and the baby were hidden— "go in there and tell that child that in half an hour she and I are going to be married."

Eagan gaped.

"Then," Smith continued, "you are going to take her to your mother's farm upstate. She can use my name until her child is born. Then I'll arrange for a divorce and a fresh start in life for her."

"And the Durham baby, Chief?"

"That will be up to a court to decide. But if no one else wants the child, I'll adopt him."

Eagan said, "You're okay, Chief."

Smith didn't even hear him. He had turned his back and was staring at the silver-framed picture of his wife. "You don't mind, do you, Martha?" he asked. "I've helped a lot of boys. This time I'm just helping a little girl."

He turned around, and seemed surprised to find Craig, his squad, and the bodies on the floor still there. The silver-haired gambler eyed the bodies distastefully, then glowered at Craig.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" he demanded. "Wrap them up for you?"

THE END

CORPSES ON DISPLAY

By ROBERT C. BLACKMON

When Joe Ives caught the small body which came hurtling from the upper stories of the Raynor-Evenson Department Store, he knew that his date with Irene Davis was not going to be the quiet affair for which he'd hoped.

Joe Ives kicked the wrecked door open.

DETECTIVE JOE IVES spaded big hands into the pockets of his gray trousers, and scowled at the men arranging clothing dummies in the display windows of the Raynor-Evenson Department Store. His husky figure shifted impatiently, his scowl traveled up the seven stories of the building to the lighted office windows on the top floor.

Here he was on his night off-duty, all dressed up for a date with Ilene Davis, Carl B. Evenson's blonde secretary—and Ilene had to work late. She told him she'd meet him at seven-thirty, but it was almost eight o'clock now. Joe glared at the glass entrance doors of the store, as if trying to pull Ilene from the building by sheer will power.

Then he heard the slight, fluttering sound above him—

His eyes went up. He saw the thing falling rapidly toward the sidewalk where he stood. In the uncertain light of the street, it appeared to be a small baby—white clothes fluttering, it plunged toward the concrete.

Joe Ives dove across the sidewalk, beneath the tiny, falling figure; his hands whipped up to catch the white, fluttering shape. He got a glimpse of pink, chubby legs, large blue eyes, and curly yellow hair; and he felt himself sweating for fear that might fail to stop the tiny figure before it hit the sidewalk.

Then it struck his hands, and he held it, trying to be as gentle as he could. The impact stung his palms, though he dropped his arms to cushion the shock as much as possible. Almost instantly, he knew the little figure was not a living creature—it was too stiff and unyielding. Light from the display windows revealed a large, pink-cheeked doll.

Joe Ives swore. Something Ilene Davis had told him flashed into his mind. She said the Raynor-Evenson Department Store had been troubled by inside-job thievery for several months. Raynor and Evenson were keeping it quiet, trying to catch the person or persons responsible. No one in the store knew about it, other than Raynor, Evenson, Ilene—and the thief, or thieves. Both Raynor and Evenson were staying late at the store every night, hoping to stop the robberies without calling the police and getting some unwelcome publicity.

Momentarily, Joe wondered if the doll had been stolen and tossed to the street. But he discarded the idea—a thief would hardly do that, unless he had someone outside to catch the doll.

Frowning, he turned the doll over. There were red smears on his fingers, he noted; and he thought first of blood. Then he saw the seven shaky letters printed on the back of the doll's dress . . . HELP JOE.

The letters had been printed with something soft and red—a lipstick. Ilene Davis' lipstick!

◆

JOE dropped the doll and sprinted to the glass-paneled doors of the store. He caught the brass door handles in his big fists, and shook until the glass insets rattled.

A thin, sallow youth, wrestling with a clothing dummy in the window to the right of the door, yelled something that didn't penerate the plate glass window. Joe shook the portals again, and the youth got out of the window and came running.

He opened the big doors a crack. "Go away!" he shrilled. "You can't come in! It's against the store rules to—"

Joe Ives shoved past him into the store. His jaws were set grimly, and his brown eyes were glinting.

"Listen, Mister!" The youth caught his arm. "You can't come in! Mr. Street'll raise—"

"Maurice!" A sharp, irritable voice yelped from the rear of the dimly-lighted first floor. "Put that man out!"

Joe saw a tall partially bald man in dark clothing running toward them, along a counter-flanked aisle. He knew the man was Elbert Street, foreman of the Raynor-Evenson window display crews. He pushed Maurice aside and ran toward Street.

"Ilene Davis is in trouble—Evenson's office!" Joe snapped. He went past Street, toward the motionless escalator leading to the second floor.

"That's—impossible!" Street skidded as he turned and ran after Ives, calling, "Mr. Evenson and Mr. Raynor are up there with her. Strang, the watchman, is patrolling the store. Nothing could—"

Joe missed the rest. He reached the escalator and went up three steps at a jump. Street stopped at the bottom of the flight, voicing more protests.

A dim light burned on the second floor. It showed Joe a weird forest of cloth-draped store counters and clothing racks. It also showed the stairway leading to the third floor.

Joe went up it at a gallop.

The third, fourth and fifth floors were duplicates of those below; each boasted a dim light and covered counters and racks. The sixth floor was also lighted by a dim night-light, some distance from the stairhead. Joe located the flight leading to the seventh and top floor and started toward it. He was breathing fast from the rapid climb. He made four steps, and stopped abruptly. His broad fists knotted; the gleam in his eyes seemed to freeze into a diamond-hard sheen.

A slightly built man in a blue uniform was lying on the floor twenty feet away, near the foot of the stairs leading up to the seventh floor. A blue watchman's cap lay beside him. Joe knew instantly that the man was Ed Strange, the Raynor-Evenson watchman—he'd seen Strang several times while waiting for Ilene. He started toward Strang, wishing he'd brought his service gun. Dressed for a date, he hadn't worn it.

Strange sat up as Ives reached him. The watchman's eyes were glassy. He saw Joe, and his gnarled fist pawed clumsily for the ancient revolver holstered at his waist. Joe's darting right hand pinned Strang's gun wrist.

He shook the slight watchman. "Snap out of it, Strang! I'm Joe Ives! What happened?"

Strang blinked slowly. "Doggone if I know. I heard a noise over here, like somebody coming downstairs, easy-like. I come over to see who it was, and I—I guess somebody hit me." His wrinkled fingers touched the gash in his left temple, over the ear. "Danged if I ain't hit! I'm bleeding!"

Joe didn't wait to hear any more. Vaulting over Strang, he ran to the stairway, and went up in long, racing strides. He heard Strang yell something, but didn't understand what the watchman said. Then he was on the seventh and top floor.

Light from the glass panels of two office doors on opposite sides of the broad hall added to the glow of the single night light. Other, dark offices lined the hall to a plain wooden door at the far end. Several long benches and a few chairs gave the hall the appearance of a waiting room.

The lighted panel of the door to Joe's left bore small black letters which spelled DAVID RAYNOR. He saw that as he ran to the door on his right. On its lighted panel was marked: CARL B. EVENSON.

Joe Ive's big fingers found the door knob; he twisted as he called Ilene's name. The door was locked. His right elbow came up, poised to smash the glass panel. But the door opened a crack, and he shoved his weight against it, went through, into the office beyond. He saw Ilene Davis, then the girl was clinging to his arm, crying.

HE COULD feel her slim figure trembling. "Joe! I thought you'd never come!" Her husky voice was blurred as she talked excitedly. Her eyes were wide and blue and frightened, her face small and childlike. Her long, curly hair almost matched the dark gold color of her dress. "I—I'm so—scared!"

"You're all right now." Joe patted her shoulder clumsily. "Everything's all right now. What happened?" His eyes went around the office, missing nothing.

There was a tall, green-shaded lamp on a glass-topped desk to his left. The swivel chair behind the desk was empty. There were two telephones on the desk, one with a row of pearl buttons that identified it as an inter-office phone. A small iron safe sat behind the desk, its door closed. Ilene's typewriter desk was in a corner, near the windows, to his right.

"Mr. Evenson was dictating some letters." Ilene's lips were quivering. "He stopped and said he wanted to take a look around the store for a few minutes. It was about those—robberies, you know. He suspected Mr. Strang, I believe. He went out and said he would be back in a few moments. That was about seven-thirty. I waited and waited, wishing he'd come back so I could go. I knew you were downstairs, waiting. I heard a noise out in the reception hall. It—made me nervous. I was already about to cry. I thought perhaps it was Mr. Evenson, coming back. But he didn't come in. I went to the door, opened it—and—" Her voice lost some fo its huskiness. "I saw Mr. Evenson lying on the floor of the reception hall near the door. He was so—still! There was blood on his head!"

She clung to Joe as she continued, "I slammed the door and locked it. I tried to call Mr. Raynor, but the office phone was dead. The outside phone was dead, too. I was afraid to scream. I was afraid the —person who—killed Mr. Evenson would come in here. Mr. Evenson had those sample dolls in the office. I knew you were downstairs. I wrote on the doll's dress and threw it out of the window. I knew you would see it and—"

"What's all the excitement about, Ilene?" The hard, brusk voice came from behind them.

Ed Strang and a short, heavily built man came into Evenson's office. The short man was David Raynor, Evenson's partner. Joe had seen him several times before. Raynor wore a dark gray suit, the creases knife-edged; his black shoes were highly polished. His fat face was pink, his eyes like black buttons. There was a hint of sullenness about his small mouth—he seemed soft, somehow, in direct contrast to his voice. He had a reputation, Joe Ives knew, of gambling heavily —and losing heavily.

"Mr. Raynor!" Ilene still clung to Joe's arm, and he could feel her shivering. "This is Mr. Ives, a friend, a detective. I—I called him." Rapidly, she explained.

"I—I had to do something, Mr. Raynor, and the phones wouldn't work. I hope you don't think I did the wrong thing in—"

"Certainly not. Raynor made a gesture with a pink hand. He smiled at Joe Ives. "I'm sure there must be some logical explanation for what you saw—or thought you saw, Miss Davis. Carl isn't on the floor in the reception hall. Strang and I just came through the hall. We saw nothing. But Strang burst into my office a moment ago, gibbering about someone knocking him in the head. He seems to have seen a shadow also, and—"

"Wasn't no shadow give me this!" Strang's blue eyes went wide with sudden concern. He touched the gash on his temple. "There's somebody or something in this here store!"

"Nonsense." Raynor laughed. "You probably fell and hit your head on something. Carl will show up in a few moments, and prove the whole thing just a case of two nervous people who are jumping at shadows."

"It wasn't nerves!" Ilene's voice lost all of its huskiness. It became shrill: "Mr. Evenson did leave the office, and he hasn't come back. I did see him on the floor of the reception hall, and his head was cut!" The girl pushed away from Ives, and stood with her hands clenched at her sides. "Why were the telephones dead? Why hasn't Mr. Evenson come back? Why—"

Abruptly, she stumbled toward Joe, her face suddenly grown unnaturally pale. She crumpled.

Joe stepped forward quickly and caught her before she could fall. He got her to the chair near her typewriter desk.

"Try those phones, Raynor," he snapped over his shoulder, as he eased Ilene into the chair.

Raynor tried both instruments, replaced them. His fat face was grave as he turned. His little black eyes were very bright. "Both telephones are dead," he said tersely.

"Do what you can for Ilene." Joe straightened. "Strang and I'll look for Evenson. Come on, Strang." He started toward the door.

The gray haired watchman shifted uncertainly. His washed blue eyes went to Raynor.

"Go with Detective Ives, Strang!" Raynor told him. "Something—may have happened to—Carl."

BROWS wrinkled over hard brown eyes, Joe left the office and went out into the reception hall, with Strang following. The detective stood in the hall for a moment, eyes roving, taking in everything. But he could see nothing in the hall that seemed unusual.

"Where does the door at the end of the hall lead to?" he asked.

Uh—the dummy room." Strang swallowed noisily. His right hand was glued to the ancient revolver at his waist. That's where they keep all the dummies they use for display on the floors and in the windows downstairs. It—it's a spooky place. I don't ever go in there at night." Strang swallowed again. "I tell you something's wrong with this store. Mr. Raynor and Mr. Evenson's been prowling around here at night for a couple of weeks. They never told me why. If I could get me another job, I wouldn't stay here. I—Look here. We don't *have* to go in the dummy room. Nobody ever goes in there."

"We're going, right now" Joe said. He scowled thoughtfully.

The gash on Strang's head might have been made by an accidental fall, and Ilene might have imagined seeing Carl B. Evenson lying on the reception hall floor. But why were the telephones in Evenson's office dead? And there had been thievery in the store.

They reached the door. Joe stepped aside.

"Go ahead," he ordered. "Open up and turn on the light."

Strang opened the door, reached inside

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and clicked a switch. A dim light came on in the room beyond; and the watchman stepped away from the open door, fast.

"I—I don't want to go in there, Mr. Ives," he said shakily. "Them—them things look too—alive?"

Joe Ives said nothing. He stepped through the doorway.

The room was broad and long, crowded by the dummies—men, women and children. He saw a tall, slender woman wearing a pink, flouncy dress, and a man near her, in a flashy military uniform. Other figures were in various stages of undress. Some of them lacked arms. All of them seemed to stare at the door.

Joe heard Strang's whimper behind him, and strode toward the silent, grouped figures. Strang followed, leaving the door open. Joe walked past the woman in the flouncy dress and the uniformed man, his nerves tighter than usual. The glass eyes of the silent figures seemed to follow his every move. He could understand now why Strang didn't like the place.

Strang followed very slowly, as if reluctant to leave the open door. His breathing was loud in the room.

Joe Ives passed a group of figures, then something on the floor to his right caught his eye. He could feel the short hair rising on the back of his neck.

The thing on the floor was Carl B. Evenson!

Evenson sprawled at the feet of two dummies. Joe Ive's mouth tightened grimly, and he started toward the body.

"Mr. Ives!" Strang's shrill voice, almost in his ear, made him jump. "I—I got to get out of here! Them—them eyes"—Strang saw Evenson, and his voice choked off. He yelped once, then turned and ran out.

Joe went forward to examine the corpse's wound more thoroughly. He had hardly moved before a thin, shrill sound reached his ears. It came again, then stopped, as though it had been choked off. It had come from the seventh floor, from one of the offices—the sound of a woman screaming.

◆

JOE IVES' big body was in motion almost before the scream died. His feet drummed the floor as he sprinted toward the open door, out into the hall. He didn't see Ed Strang, but he did see the closed door of Evenson's office. The door had been open when he and Strang left the office.

His big legs moved faster as he ran to the door, caught the knob and twisted. The door was locked. He could hear faint sounds, as though someone inside were struggling. His right arm snapped up, elbow crooked, and he smashed in the glass panel.

Ilene was on the floor, kneeling. Her slim, gold-clad body was being forced baskward. Raynor was bent over her, his fat hands about her throat. His face was twisted in anger.

Joe Ives kicked the wrecked door open. Glass crunched under his feet as he plunged into the office.

Raynor made an incoherent sound, jerked Ilene clear of the floor, then flung her toward Joe. Instinctively, Ives caught Ilene, to keep her from falling into the jagged glass on the floor. He saw Raynor plunging toward him, fat fists clenched.

Big arms moving smoothly, Joe swung Ilene to one side, just clear of the glass, and dropped her, almost sliding her along the floor, out of the way. Then Raynor was on him, swinging wildly.

Deliberately, Joe hit Raynor in the face with his left, driving him back. Long hours in the police gymnasium gave his blows accuracy and force. Raynor fought wildly, leaving himself wide open. Joe clipped him on the chin—a clean punch—and stepped back. Raynor's legs became unjointed, and he dropped to the floor.

Joe Ives turned his attention to Ilene. The girl's throat was bruised; and she was unconscious, lying on the floor where he had dropped her. Clucking sympathetically, he put her in the typewriter desk chair again, then looked around.

The small safe behind Evenson's desk was open. A tangle of papers spilled from it. Raynor was no the floor in front of the desk, out cold. Beside him lay a long manila envelope which had fallen from his breast pocket. Scrawled on the front of the envelope were two words: EVENSON—PERSONAL.

The envelope contained seven promissory notes, each for five thousand dollars. All were payable to Carl B. Evenson, and all were signed by David Raynor. The first note was ninety days past due. Each of the seven matured at ninety day intervals.

A choked moan in the office jerked Joe about. Ilene was beginning to recover consciousness, and he went to her.

"Mr.—Raynor was taking things from Mr. Evenson's safe." She rubbed dazedly at her throat. She saw Raynor's fat figure on the floor and shuddered. "His face—was—vicious, when he saw me looking. I'd recoverd from my—my faint. I ran to the door to call you, but he caught me, slammed the door. I screamed and he—"

"Mr. Raynor! Mr. Evenson!"

It was Street's voice. The tall window-crew foreman started into Evenson's office, but stopped as the smashed glass crackled under his feet. His dark, sunken eyes stared about the office wildly. Behind him, Ed Strang peered fearfully into the office.

"What—what happened?" Street's thin face was pale. "Strang called me on the sixth floor inter-office phone, and yelled that something was happening up—"

"Yeah, sure." Joe Ives slid the envelope containing the seven notes into his pocket. "A lot of things have been happening. Carl B. Evenson has been murdered and—"

"Carl—murdered!"

David Raynor sat up quickly. Fat fingers rubbed at his jaw. His eyes were wide and terrified.

"You think *I* did it, because of the notes!" he exclaimed.

HIS jowls shook as he got to his feet. The pink was gone from his face, leaving it white and haggard.

"Listen, I can explain. You've got to believe me. Look—you left me in here with Ilene. I thought she'd be unconscious for a while. I knew you and Strang would be gone for at least ten or fifteen minutes. I didn't know Carl was dead. I thought—well, if he *was* dead, I could take those seven notes from his safe, and no one would ever know anything about them. If Carl *was* dead, the notes would be in his estate and I would have to pay them—and I couldn't pay. I've gambled a lot; lost heavily for over a year. I got in a jam and Carl let me have the money. The notes represent most of my share in the store—I had to have them. I'd already defaulted on the first note, and Carl was beginning to push me. I got him to give me more time, but I knew I couldn't pay. I knew the notes were in his safe."

Raynor gulped. All of the bruskness was gone from him now.

"I really didn't mean to choke Ilene. I—I just saw her as an—obstacle to my getting the notes without anyone knowing. I really didn't intend to—kill her. I just wanted to—to keep her from knowing I had taken the notes. That sounds weak, but it's true. I—didn't kill Carl."

"Raynor killed Evenson because he

owed him money he couldn't pay!" Street's voice was high and shrill. Behind him, Ed Strang made a choking sound and stared at Raynor with eyes that threatened to pop from his head. "He killed Evenson to get those notes! He tried to kill Miss Davis because she saw him taking the notes from Evenson's safe! Raynor was very possibly stealing from the store because he needed money!"

There was a high note of triumph in Street's voice. "I tell you Raynor killed Evenson, and hid his body in the dummy room! He—"

"How did you know there was stealing going on in the store?" Joe snapped. His eyes were gleaming. "How did you know the body was in the dummy room? Raynor and Evenson were keping the thievery quiet. They didn't tell anyone, even Strang. Nobody knew for sure that Evenson was dead—until I examined him in the dummy room! Nobody knew he was in there, except Strang, myself—and the killer!"

"Strang told me over the phone!" Street shrilled wildly.

"I didn't!" Strang maintained indignantly. He pushed past Street and came into the office. "I told you something had happened up here and to come up! But I didn't know Mr. Evenson was dead, so I couldn't have—"

Glass crackled as Street moved. One hand snapped out; he jerked the ancient revolver from Strang's belt. The muzzle of the weapon covered Ives.

"Don't move!" Street's sunken eyes were blazing. "Get back, Strang. Raynor, help me and you'll get the notes. This is Strang's gun. If all of them are killed with Strang's gun and Strang is aranged as a suicide, we—"

"No!" Strang screamed. "You—"

Street moved the gun toward the gray-haired watchman,and Joe Ives plunged.

The blast was deafening in the office. Joe felt something hit his left arm, high up; felt the arm go numb, and knew he had taken a slug. Then he was within reach of Street. His right fist whipped out, aimed for the man's face.

Joe bored in, skidding on the glass. His big right fist came up from his waist, all of his husky weight behind it. His knuckles caught Street squarely in the mouth.

Street's arms flailed aimlessly. The ancient revolver flew from his hand, dropped to the floor and slid across the office toward Ilene's desk. The window crew foreman went through the open door, crashing to the floor in the reception hall.

David Raynor choked unintelligible words and started across the office.

Ilene Davis shrilled something and leaped from the typewriter desk chair. She scooped the ancient revolver from the floor, pointed it at Raynor.

Joe twisted big fingers into Street's coat collar and dragged him back into Evenson's office. Street was beginning to stir and moan.

Ilene had backed David Raynor into the corner near the desk, pointing Strang's ancient gun at his middle.

"No! Ilene!" Raynor bleated. "I was going to help Detective Ives!"

◆

JOE dropped Street just inside the office door; he went over to Ilene. He was grinning, though his left arm was beginning to throb with pain.

"It's all under control now, Ilene." He took the gun from the girl's shaking hands. "You'd better get out to a telephone and call in for me. Just tell 'em you're calling for Ives and it's murder."

"I thought he was going to jump on you, to help Street!" Ilene said excitedly. "I thought he was going to hurt you, Joe! I—"

"The telephone." Joe grinned at her, but he didn't feel much like grinning. "Hurry. I don't feel so good."

The girl ran from the office.

Strang hadn't moved at all. His mouth was still opening and closing in sheer incomprehension.

Street rolled over on the floor; he moaned. Joe turned Strang's ancient revolver toward him, while he leaned against the front of Evenson's desk. The drilled arm was making him a little dizzy.

"As you were, Street," he cautioned. "It's tough, but you shouldn't have done it. It was smart, taking advantage of Raynor's brainstorm to try unloading the whole thing on him, but it didn't work. The way the thing happened—Evenson prowled the store tonight, hunting the unknown thief. He caught you stealing stuff, and you killed him. That probably happened on the fifth or sixth floor. You knew just about where Strang was, because he made regular rounds. After killing Evenson, you got panicky. You had a body and didn't know what to do with it. Hiding the body in the dummy room was a bright idea. Strang never went there at night. Few others went there. The body would not be discovered for hours—you hoped. That would give you time enough to get rid of the things you had stolen, time enough to figure how to keep yourself in the clear.

"Ilene heard you when you brought the body through the reception hall. You heard her before she opened the office door, dropped the body and hid behind one of the chairs out there. She saw the body, slammed and locked the office door. You knew she would try to call for help. The wires for the inter-office phone and the regular telephone are exposed somewhere in the reception hall. It took only a couple of seconds to cut them. That kept Ilene from calling anybody.

"You carried Evenson's body into the dummy room, left it there, and headed back downstairs. Strang came to investigate. You hid and cracked him over the head before he saw you. Then you ran downstairs. Your job as window-crew foreman gave you every chance to prowl the store any time while the crews were working on the windows. Any one crew would think you were with one of the others when you went on your thieving rounds. The stuff was probably loaded into your car out back, and sold for whatever you could get. Raynor's kicking over the traces tonight was just a lucky break for—"

"He's the man, all right!" Strang's mouth finally spilled words, shakily. "I seen him upstairs a lot of times. Spoke to him. He said he was getting stuff for the windows, and I figured it was all right. Nobody never did tell me nothing about all this stealing, so I didn't think—"

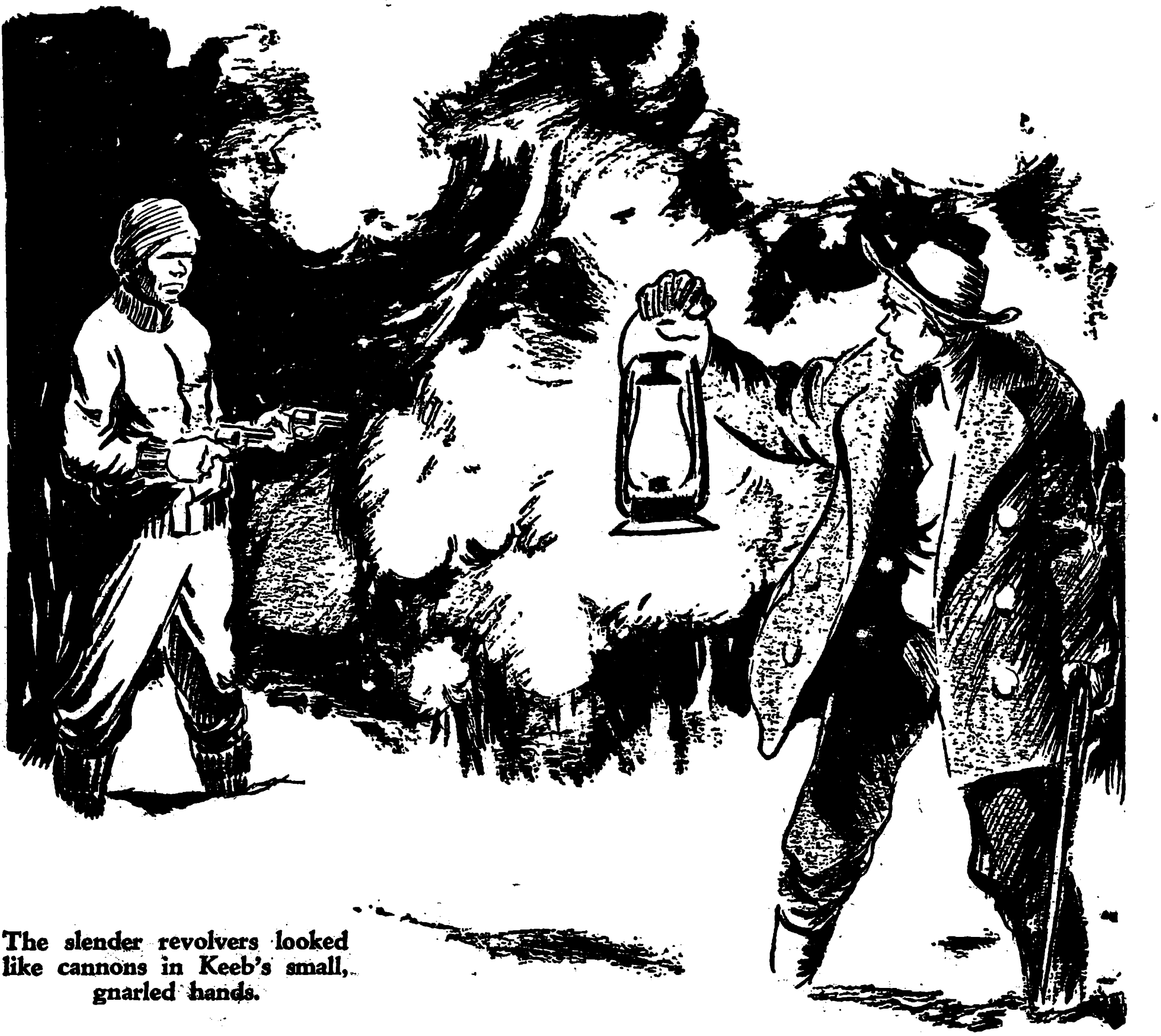
"All right. I did it" Street's thin face was haggard. He pushed up to his elbows. "But I didn't mean to kill Evenson. He caught me taking things on the sixth floor. I tried to tell him it was stuff for the windows, but he knew it wasn't. He knew I was the thief. He said he was going to have me arrested. I—I grabbed the first thing I could find and hit him. I—I didn't mean to kill him. I didn't mean what I said about killing all of you with Strang's gun. I—"

"You and Raynor. Both of you not meaning to do things, but doing 'em just the same." Joe Ives grinned. His left arm was beginning to hurt badly. "It's going to be tough on you two, just the same." He glanced at Raynor.

David Raynor hadn't moved out of the corner where Ilene Davis had forced him with Strang's gun.

Joe heard Ilene's heels clicking out in the reception hall, and he smiled, in contemplation of their date.

THEY CAN'T KILL US!



The slender revolvers looked like cannons in Keeb's small, gnarled hands.

CHAPTER ONE

Murder in White

AFTER A WHILE the windshield wipers were useless against the swirling snow. Steve Garth hunched tensely over the wheel, driving more by instinct than by sight; wondering when the tire chains would cease to grip. In twenty minutes the countryside would be completely dark.

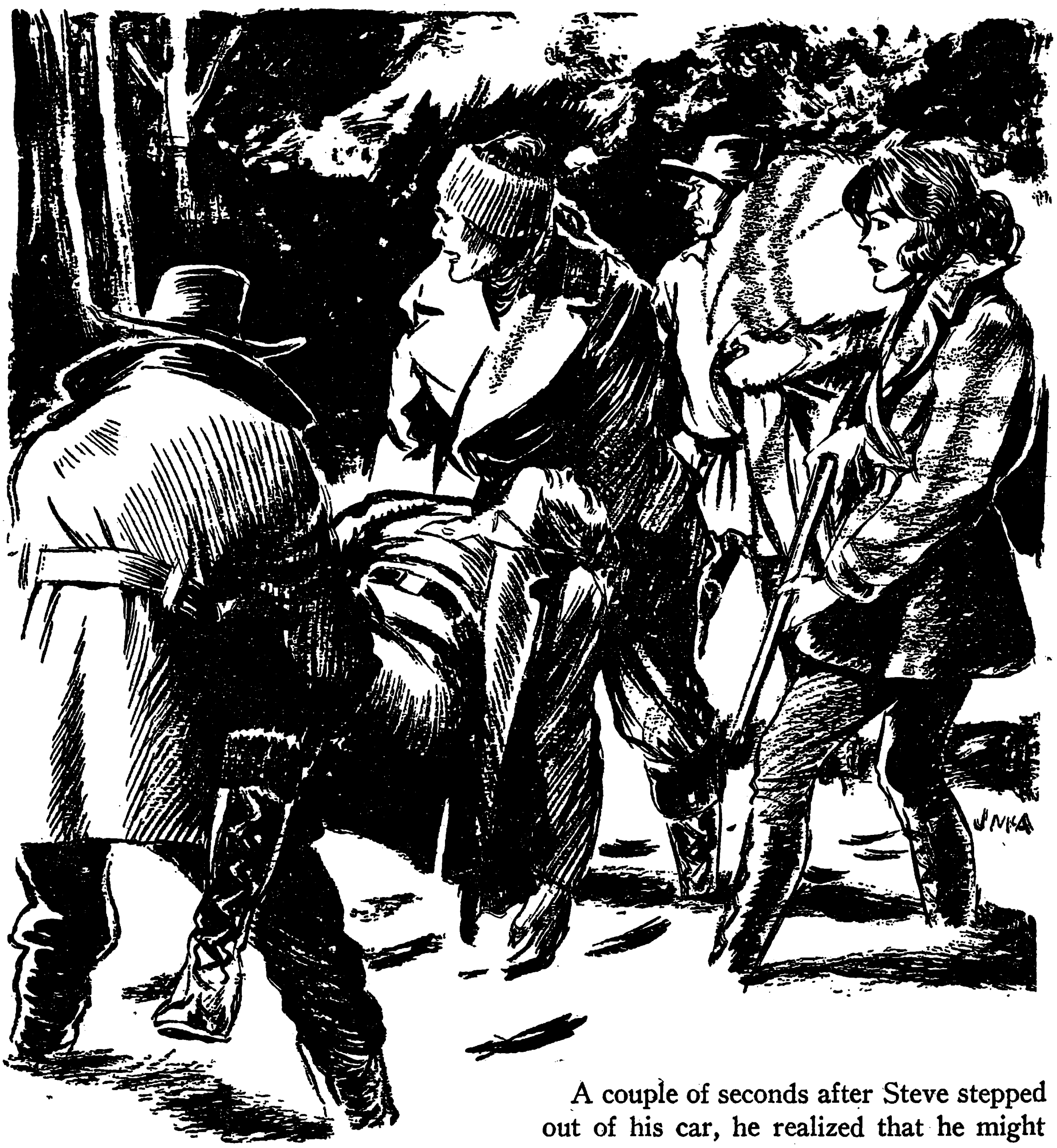
He passed the wooden bridge over Sook River and relaxed a bit. If he remembered correctly, half a mile beyond the bridge a single-lane dirt road turned left to Lon's farm. The car plowed on. Every minute or so, he stopped to wipe the windows, and peer at white trees distorted by dancing curtains of snow. The lane did not appear. Dusk came suddenly, and Steve Garth knew that he had missed the road to his brother's house.

A numbing sense of helplessness possessed him. Since dawn he had driven better than four hundred miles, nearly half of them through violent blizzard. Yet, at this moment, he might be farther away from Lon than if he had stayed in New York. If he spent the night in the car, he couldn't do Lon any good; if he left its protection, there was a chance that he would wander around blindly until his endurance gave out.

A Spine-Tingling Mystery Novelette

By RUSSELL GRAY

In that wide, white, frozen world up near the Canadian border, nothing seemed real to Steve Garth. There was Keeb, the kill-crazy dwarf; Anton Arn, the brown-garbed man of mystery—and the frozen corpse that pointed. Then, too, there was Ila, the lovely girl whom Steve had to trust with his life—even though he knew she was one of those who were out to see him die!



Still he had to take the risk. Last night a wire from Lon had roused him out of bed. It had said simply. *"I need you. Hurry."* Coming from Lon, that was a bad sign.

A couple of seconds after Steve stepped out of his car, he realized that he might not survive as far as Lon's house. His rubbers were ridiculous—even the shallowest drifts came knee-high; his overcoat and gloves hadn't been made for below zero weather; his felt hat left his ears free to freeze. On top of that, night was swooping down fast, and he hadn't any idea of which direction to take.

Steve snapped on the flashlight he'd taken from the car. The beam sprayed directly on a snowman, sitting on the side of the road.

That was the first impression he got, but then he realized that a snowman wouldn't be wearing an overcoat. One of the arms was held out stiffly from the shoulder, and on the underside of the arm, Steve could distinguish cloth of a sleeve which the snow hadn't been able to cover.

He waded up to the snowman and brushed fluffy snow off the face. Human features appeared. Through his glove the flesh felt as if it were carved of ice. In the left cheek there was a neat, bloodless hole.

Snow lashed Steve from all sides, boring into his nose and mouth. He stepped back toward the scant shelter of a tree and stood huddled there, thinking, *So this is it! It had to be murder to make Lon down his pride and hate . . .*

Lon was eleven years older than Steve, and they had never really known each other. Steve would always remember the brutal, methodical thrashings Lon had given him upon the least provocation. Hate had been a part of his memory of Lon for years after each had gone his separate way.

Six years ago, Steve had decided it was absurd for a grown man to harbor a childhood animosity for his only living relative. He'd gone to spend a month with Lon on Lon's farm in Witkill, up near the St. Lawrence River and the Canadian border. But it hadn't worked out. Lon was dour, humorless, self-righteous. In addition, small farm life had got on Steve's nerves. It was perhaps inevitable that one day they went at each other with their fists.

It was the fault of both—a stupid argument about something neither remembered an hour later. In the heat of anger, Lon exclaimed that he had thrashed Steve in the past and could do so again. Steve, remembering his hate, brought his big body to full length and told Lon that now was as good a time as any to repay those beatings.

They met in the center of the room—two blond giants. It was part of Steve's job to know how to handle his fists as well as his gun, and for all of Lon's work-hardened strength, Steve promptly knocked him sprawling.

Ten minutes later Steve packed his bags and went back to New York.

Only twice in the following six years had he heard from Lon. Last month he'd received a printed announcement that Lon had married a girl named Annie Touhy. Last night, the urgent wire—

Thinking of that wire now, Steve drew no satisfaction from the fact that Lon, for the first time in his life, had appealed to him for help. He was remembering that Lon was his brother, and that this murdered man might be tied up with Lon's trouble.

He looked again at the body. Snow was waist-high around it, but it wasn't packed hard enough to keep the weight propped up. The cold did that. The victim must have frozen so rapidly after the bullet struck him that his body had stiffened before it could topple over.

◆

YET the cold wouldn't have kept that arm up, outstretched—as if at the last moment it had been pointing to something.

The idea was crazy, perhaps, but Steve went through the drift again and scraped snow off the extended arm. The hand was clenched, save for the index finger which was pointing to the trees.

He saw then the thin, snow-covered birch stump on which the wrist rested.

That had kept the arm from falling. But that pointing finger?

What Steve did then was as fantastic as the unreal world scooped out of the storm by his flashlight. He dropped into the snow and got his eyes level with the finger. While he stood, snow-laden branches had obstructed his view, but in a crouching position, he could see between the tree trunks. The dead finger pointed directly at two lights a few hundred feet away.

Steve got to his feet, laughing a little crazily through frosted lips. The intolerable cold was biting into his bones, and he no longer felt his ears or feet or hands. Shelter, which otherwise would have gone unnoticed, had been pointed out to him by a dead man.

He was fagged out by the time he reached the house, although it was only a short distance. It was a rambling log cabin, and the light that glowed through two of the windows was the cheeriest sight he'd ever seen. Needles jabbed into his fists as he pounded on the door.

It swung inward, and for all his height he had to lift his eyes to those of the man who stood before him. He topped Steve by a good six inches; but he seemed thin enough to crawl through a keyhole.

The blaze crackling in the fieldstone fireplace drew Steve. As he stepped forward, the tall man's hand touched his shoulder.

"Where you going?"

"All I want is shelter," Steve said.

"Beat it!" the tall man ordered sharply.

Steve's muscles tightened with rage. He brushed snow out of his eyes and took in the tall man's face. It was the shape of his body—an elongated death's-head covered by splotchy red stubble.

"Let him come in, Tell," a quiet voice said.

A man appeared through an inner door, and crossed the large room. His dress was better suited to a Greenwich Village penthouse studio than to this northern farm community. He wore a subdued brown dressing gown, and under it brown trousers with razor-edged creases. A brown silk scarf was knotted at his throat. His hair and eyes were brown also.

Steve said, "Thanks," and moved closer to the warmth of the fire.

The man in brown came as far as the huge oak table. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?" he asked. There was no inflection, no quality in the voice he used.

"I'm Lon Garth's brother, Steve. We resemble each other. I'm on my way to his farm."

Behind Steve the tall man growled.

"Quiet, Tell," the man in brown said. It didn't sound like an order; just two toneless words passing through lips which scarcely moved. But the growl stopped, abruptly.

The man in brown looked Steve over with eyes that didn't reveal anything. His face was very much like his voice—utterly expressionless. Men didn't scare Steve easily, but that complete nothingness in those sleek, well-cut features gave him a slight case of the willies.

"You are a private detective," the man in brown said. It was not a question; just a flat statement issued by a wax figure.

STEVE turned his back to the fire so that he could keep his eyes on the tall servant, Tell. Menace was as thick in here as the cold outside. It struck him that perhaps the dead man had pointed deliberately to this cabin as he had died.

"Did Lon tell you about me?" Steve asked.

"No . . . Tell, show Mr. Garth to the door."

"Hey, wait," Steve protested. "You can't send me away like this on such a night!"

"I do not recall having invited you here," the man in brown said.

A muscle jerked in Steve's cheek and he took two steps forward. A chair stopped him, restoring his self-control. He dropped his hands on a raccoon coat which had been thrown carelessly over the back of the chair; his fingers dug into the soft, warm material. Getting tough with these two freaks or stalking out into the blizzard wouldn't bring him to Lon in a hurry. With the temperature at fourteen below, and still falling, he had to eat crow.

"How about lending me a warm coat and boots?" Steve asked. "I'll return them in the morning." He became conscious of the fur under his hand. "This coat, for instance."

The man in brown stood motionless, looking at him with those dead brown eyes. Tell's shoulders were hunched, and his long arms dangled, ready for instant action.

Steve thought, "What's going on here?"

His fingers slid between two skins of the coat. Looking down, he saw that four or five inches of the seam had given way at the shoulder. Had he done that? He lifted the coat slightly to see the extent of the damage. It was a woman's coat. It would take two coats like that to fit him.

The dead eyes of the man in brown rested for long moments on the coat. He said, "Tell will guide you to your brother's cabin." Then he swung around and strode out of the room.

Steve smiled to himself. The man in brown probably had a girl friend in another part of the house, and he didn't want to be disturbed by a visitor.

Tell disappeared. When he returned a minute later, he was dressed in fur coat and boots. Under his arm he carried a shotgun.

Steve went tense again. Why the gun for a short walk through the storm? And why had the man in brown changed his mind so suddenly after Steve had noticed the coat?

Tell nodded toward the door. "Let's get going."

"You first," Steve said. "You know the way."

Tell scowled, and his deep-sunken eyes glinted dangerously, but he switched on his electric lantern and stepped through the door.

Steve followed. The cold was even more intense than ever, but he kept himself erect against the blizzard, never taking his eyes from the tall, narrow back weaving ahead. He opened the second and third buttons of his overcoat and slid his automatic out of its shoulder clip, then dropped the gun into his coat pocket. His finger was ice already; he wondered if he'd be able to squeeze the trigger. For that matter, Tell couldn't use his shotgun without taking time to remove his heavy fur gloves.

After a century of frozen agony, Tell turned. "Follow this road and you'll get there."

It was only then that Steve realized that they had been on a narrow roadway for some time, no doubt the one he had missed in his car.

"You're going there with me," Steve said.

"This is far enough."

Steve brought the automatic out of his pocket. "I don't know what the play is or why, but I don't want a dose of buckshot in my back. Start moving!"

Above the lantern Tell's face was a red patch against the white snow. Steve had no feeling in the hand that held the gun. Tell must have guessed that, for a triumphant grin twisted his mouth. Then he shrugged and turned.

Tell continued the pivot, and when he had made a complete circle, the glove was gone from his right hand. And his fin-

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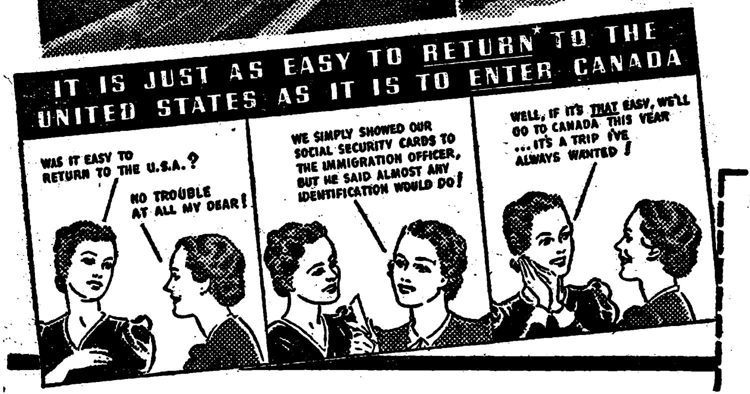
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ger was gripped around the trigger. His shotgun blasted.

CHAPTER TWO

The Unfinished Grave

TELL'S grin warned Steve, and he threw himself aside into a snowbank. His elbow cut through the soft snow, jarring against the ground; his automatic spoke of its own accord.

The slug went wild, but Tell couldn't know by how much. He could realize only that Steve was shooting at a target made clear by the lantern, while Steve himself was practically invisible at the outer fringe of light. Tell flung the lantern from him, and leaped among the trees.

Steve rolled in the snow, feeling it powder against his face and penetrate his mouth and nostrils. He rose to his knees, sucking frost out of his trigger finger, then placed a shot on either side of the road. That was to show Tell the wisdom of keeping beyond shotgun range.

The electric lantern, half-buried in the snow, was a dull yellow splotch in the vast blackness of the night. Somewhere on the other side of it Tell might be crouching, waiting for Steve to snap on his flashlight.

Steve slid backward through the snow, then stood up and felt his way between the trees, guided by the lantern as he skirted widely around the road. A hundred feet past the lantern he returned to the road.

Then he had to snap on his flashlight or be hopelessly lost. He walked, swinging the light around him. Tell couldn't help spotting it if he were anywhere nearby, but Steve was banking on the fact that Tell wouldn't have the nerve to get in close enough for shotgun work.

The snow was beginning to lessen now, but the frightful cold remained, more unendurable because Steve's shoes and trousers and hands were wet. He clenched his teeth and stumbled on up the lane, wondering how many more steps his failing strength would permit.

He was almost on Lon's house before he noticed it, for the one-story frame structure was as dark as the night itself. Where would Lon and his wife be on a night like this? Steve wondered. Had he arrived too late—too late for what?

A pencil-line of light cleft the front of the barn where the barndoor was not tightly closed. He turned aside from the house and pushed on an additional two hundred feet. A dull rhythmic thudding came out of him. He shoved the barndoor aside on its runner and stepped inside.

Near the stalls his brother Lon was digging with a pickaxe. A girl was leaning on a spade, watching him with a curiously fixed expression, as if she would be unable to breathe until Lon got through.

Steve said, "Hello, Lon."

Lon scrambled out of the foot-deep pit, snatching up a rifle resting against a post. The girl whirled and cried out.

"Stay where you are!" Lon ordered harshly. "Get your hands up and—" The rifle barrel dipped as Lon gawked. "My God, it's Steve!"

Steve moved slowly toward them. Though it was warmer in here, and sheltered, he found himself shivering violently. This was all wrong, he thought—as wrong as the murdered man pointing; and the man in brown with the living-dead face; and the incredibly tall thin man who had tried to kill him. Worse even than this nocturnal digging in the barn was the fact that Lon—who should have been expecting him—was astonished to see him.

"Your brother?" the girl whispered.

Lon paid no attention to her question. Anger jerked in his heavy, rugged face—and fear also. Steve had never before known his brother to fear anything.

The girl stepped toward Steve. "I'm your sister-in-law, Annie. You must be frozen. Come to the house."

He had envisioned Lon's bride of one month as plump, plain and fortyish—the kind of woman who would bury herself away on a farm with a dour, dull man like Lon. But this girl was no more than half Lon's age; she was slender and good-looking.

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SHE put a hand on Steve's arm to lead him out. He stood, solid as a rock, his eyes jumping about. And then he saw it—the six-foot long object covered by burlap, lying just outside an empty stall a few feet past the shallow pit.

"What are you doing here?" Lon demanded.

"You sent for me. I got your wire last night."

"Sent for you?" Lon bit out each word. Then he laughed bitterly. "Why should I want the likes of you?"

"Your wire said you needed me," Steve replied.

Lon swung savagely toward his wife. "Annie, you did this!"

She flinched before Lon's upraised fist. "I swear I didn't. He's a detective, isn't he? Why would I want to send for a detective?"

Lon dropped his arm weakly to his side, and Steve saw now how tired Lon looked, how old.

"No, I reckon you didn't," Lon decided. His anger flashed across at Steve. "Why lie to me about sending for you?"

"Your name was signed," Steve insisted. "If neither of you sent it—well, it's not the first cockeyed thing that's happened tonight."

Lon and Annie exchanged glances. Then Lon said: "Well, you're here. Annie will take you to the house and give you something warm. I'll be along soon."

"After you finish digging the grave?" Steve asked softly.

Annie clamped the back of her hand over her mouth. Lon swung his rifle up.

"Get out of here, Steve!" he muttered. "This is none of your business."

"Yes it is." Steve started around the pit toward the burlap bundle.

"For God's sake, go!" Lon's rifle swung up with deadly intensity.

The brothers looked at each other—two blond giants resembling each other more than ever in the hard set of their faces and the open hostility in their steel-blue eyes.

Steve turned his back to Lon and dropped to his knees beside the burlap-covered object. His nerves were a single knot. Would Lon shoot? His face had said that he would. Yet could his own brother. . . .

Steve pulled off one of the burlap bags. The dead face of Jim Venning stared up at him.

Behind him Steve heard Annie's labored breathing. There was no sound from Lon.

During Steve's stay in Witkill six years ago, Doc Raynor's regular Saturday night poker games had been one of the few methods of entertainment. Jim Venning had been a regular participant in those games—a shiftless local lad who had no visible means of support, yet who had been able to lose large sums at poker and come back the next week to lose more.

Steve removed two more bags, and uncovered the corpse up to the waist. The hole in Venning's chest was large—buckshot could be brutal at close range. There was no blood on the ground, nor anywhere in the barn as far as he could see. The clothes were wet.

Steve replaced the burlap.

He stood up and faced his brother.

"You killed him, Lon, didn't you? You shot him outside in the snow, and because of the blizzard and the frozen ground you dragged him in here to bury him."

The rifle was tight against Lon's side. His eyes were a little mad. "Sure I killed him. I'm glad. What do you aim to do about it?"

"I don't know," Steve admitted. "Why did you do it?"

"None of your business!"

"Lon, you've got to tell him," Annie said. "Tell him how—"

"Shut up!" Lon was swaying on his feet, fighting a battle within himself. "What you aim to do, Steve? Tell me!"

"He'll shoot," Steve thought. "He's scared enough and crazy enough to shoot his own brother."

Steve said, "There's no simple answer. Even if I were to compound a murder, this corpse is only part of the pattern. There's another murdered man out on the road."

"No!" Annie said.

"Who is it?" Lon asked hoarsely.

"I never saw him before. He wasn't far from a log cabin. I stopped off there and a dead-faced man in brown—"

"Anton Arn!" Annie muttered, and turned her head away quickly.

"He wanted to throw me out into the blizzard," Steve continued. "Then I noticed a woman's raccoon coat on a chair. That didn't mean anything to me, but my seeing it must have meant something to this Anton Arn. He changed his mind and told his servant Tell to lead me here. His idea was for Tell to kill me on the way. He came pretty close to succeeding."

A squeaky voice said, "Close ain't good enough. That Tell wasn't never handy with a gun. Me, I never miss."

Annie screamed. Lon twisted his head sideways and started to swing his rifle around; then, realizing that he couldn't in time, he let the stock slide down along his leg. Steve stared, not quite believing in the reality of the creature who had stepped through the partly open barn-door.

He saw the figure of a small boy, standing with stocky legs far apart. In spite of the cold he wore only a faded leather windbreaker and a knitted skull-cap. His face didn't match the rest of him at all. His cheeks were pouchy and dirty-gray. Beady, haggard eyes were older, somehow, than any old man's. A pointed, little gray beard stuck out at a stiff angle from a practically non-existent chin. In each of his small, gnarled hands he held a slender revolver.

The dwarf said in his childish, piping voice, "Where's Jim Venning?"

"Haven't seen him in a couple of days," Lon replied hastily.

Nervous laughter trembled in Steve's stomach. He could take corpses, and attempts on his life, and finding his brother a murderer—but this preposterous little creature with the guns was too much. He got a tight grip on the automatic in his coat pocket, and took a single step forward.

The dwarf's right revolver shifted a fraction of an inch. It barked, and Steve's hat fluttered to the ground.

"That's a sample I ain't fooling," the dwarf squeaked. "Next time I'll put a bullet where it counts. Let me see your hands."

Steve hesitated, wondering if he should risk a shot through his pocket. Lon had had a better chance with his rifle and hadn't taken it, and Lon wasn't a coward, which meant that he feared and respected the dwarf's guns. Steve shrugged and brought both of his hands out into the open.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The dwarf grinned. His beady eyes were studying the pit and the pickaxe and the spade.

"He's Keeb, Anton Arn's other servant," Annie whispered. "For God's sake, don't get him mad. He'll kill us if you do."

"Nice household, that," Steve observed. "Would you call Anton Arn's two servants the long and short of murder?"

ANNIE pretended not to hear him. It wasn't funny anyway—death never is.

The dwarf was taking a long while to ponder the pit. Lon and Annie were as rigid as the frozen corpse Steve had come across earlier. A horse whinnied and kicked his stall furiously.

Finally Keeb reached a decision. "That's a grave," he asserted triumphantly. "That's Jim yonder. You killed Jim. Now I gotta kill you all."

It was clear that the dwarf was no mental marvel. It had taken him all this time to understand the obvious. Yet his kind was the most dangerous—his sluggish mind wouldn't impede the speed of his guns.

"No, Keeb!" Annie moaned. "Look, Lon will give you lots of money. He'll give you anything he's got."

"I gotta kill you all," Keeb insisted petulantly.

Steve moved his right hand up above his coat pocket, even though he knew that there wouldn't be time to get out his automatic and use it. Lon was crouching a little, ready to snap up his rifle. Maybe one of them could survive—

The dwarf's head was cocked to a side, listening. Then they all heard it—feet crunching in the snow outside.

It might be Tell, coming to finish the job; but apparently Keeb wasn't expecting anybody. A worried frown added creases to his forehead, then he straightened his head. It was plain that he was determined to get the killings over with before the newcomer came too near.

Steve forced a cocky laugh past his throat. Keeb's eyelids shot up, inquiringly.

"I'm a detective," Steve said. "That's my partner outside. If you start shooting, he'll put a bullet in your back."

Keeb considered, and decided to believe Steve. He moved backward slowly, eyes and guns covering the three in front of him. When his back touched the half-open door, he swung around it.

Steve snatched out his automatic and tossed a shot at the ceiling to warn the newcomer, running as he fired. With his own gun out, he could meet Keeb on equal terms, which was as much as he ever wanted with any man.

A shot sounded outside. Steve leaped out into the snow, and at the edge of the dim splash of light from the barn he saw the dark shape of the dwarf facing the silo. Steve held his fire, aware that if he missed he'd be a target with the light behind him. He scurried along the barn wall until the darkness covered him. But Keeb had also moved, and Steve lost him.

Lon appeared in the doorway, searching the blackness with his rifle raised.

"Get back, Lon!" Steve yelled.

At the fringe of the light a shadow stirred. Steve sprayed three hurried shots at it. Before the sound of the third had died away, Keeb answered, both his revolvers going at once. The dwarf was good, all right. Steve could feel a couple of bullets whistle uncomfortably close.

He crouched lower in the drift; and all at once he was aware that the snow had stopped completely. The cold was getting him again, yet he dared not move.

Inside the barn Lon's rifle roared.

"Where is he, Lon?" Steve called.

"You all right?" Lon's voice came back.

"Just frozen stiff."

"Keeb's gone. He showed a light near the chicken house, and I took a shot at it. Too far. He kept moving. Reckon he was scared your partner would come up behind him."

Steve remembered the newcomer. He ran across the front of the barn to the silo. Around the curve, a fur-clad figure lay on the ground. Steve got his hands under the shoulders, and the figure arose under its own power. It was a girl who hardly reached his shoulders.

"Did he get you?" Steve asked.

The girl rested against him. "I saw the light here and came over. I was coming around the silo when somebody came out. I heard a shot in the barn. He turned to me and I threw myself back and he shot at me. Who was it, Lon?"

"A dwarf named Keeb," Steve said. He added, "And I'm not Lon."

The girl pulled out of his arms, looked up at him. There was just enough light to reveal that she was very pretty. Standing there in the snow, in trim leather boots, a fur coat and a wool kerchief over her head, she was as good to look at as any girl Steve had ever seen.

"Oh, you must be Lon's brother," the girl said. "I'm Ila Touhy, Annie's sister."

Lon and Annie came up behind them. Annie fell into her sister's arms and let her tortured nerves give way to tears.

Lon put a hand on Steve's shoulder. "So there wasn't any partner? Clever work, Steve. I reckon you saved our lives."

In spite of the cold, Steve felt a warm glow spread over him. For the first time in his life he felt close to his brother.

And then, suddenly, the coldness returned. Ila's back was turned toward him as she comforted her weeping sister; and by the light of the lantern hooked over Lon's arm, Steve saw the left shoulder of Ila's raccoon coat. Between two of the skins the seams had parted.

CHAPTER THREE

Friend or Foe?

STEVE GARTH discovered that heaven was a snug farmhouse with a roaring fire, dry clothing and two attractive girls serving him steaming coffee and tasty sandwiches. Seated in front of the fireplace, he felt that he would never have the desire to get up. But he knew that on this night of murder he would have to go out again in a little while. There was a score to settle with Anton Arn and his servants.

Lon hadn't come in to the house yet—he'd stayed behind in the barn, to finish digging the grave. Steve hadn't yet made up his mind what—if anything—he ought to do about it. To begin with, he had to know a lot more.

The girls refused to talk. They moved about nervously, tight-lipped, their faces pale and drawn; they parried his questions by offering him more food.

He kept watching Ila Touhy. She would have caused an emotional upheaval in him at any time, but a lot more than her beauty troubled him now.

Steve waited until Annie was out of the room. Then he whispered, "You were the one who sent me the wire and signed Lon's name to it."

Ila turned to him with a slow, tight smile. "Is that what detectives call deduction?"

"Lon or Annie didn't send it," he said. "Out there you knew who I was at once—as if you were expecting me. It would

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have been easy for you to get my address."

"All right, I did," she admitted. "Lon was trying to fight alone and he needs help. Fighting seems to be your profession."

"That's right," Steve said. "And not trusting anybody. Maybe you had another reason beside Lon's trouble to get me out here."

"What are you trying to say?"

He wasn't certain of his ground, but the best approach was to let her have it right between the eyes. "If Lon were murdered, I'd come to Witkill and raise a row. Maybe it's best to have me here—to get rid of me at the same time as Lon."

The flashing anger in her eyes added to her beauty. "You think I tricked you to Witkill so you'd be killed?"

"It's an idea. I can believe anything about a girl who's on intimate terms with Anton Arn. You were in his house when he ordered Tell to kill me."

"So you know that I was there?" She seemed surprised. "Because of that you imagine I'd let my own sister be murdered?"

"Maybe you didn't think Annie would be endangered. But murder can't be controlled when you deal with killers like Keeb."

"He shot at me outside."

"He couldn't see who you were."

She swung toward him and for a moment he thought that he had enraged her sufficiently enough for her to tell him what he wanted to know. Then she clamped her lips tight and turned away.

Lon came in, stamping snow off his boots. He'd finished burying Jim Venning, and Steve felt his conscience pricking him again.

"Where's Annie?" Lon asked. "We should all stay in the same room till morning. No telling what they'll try."

"She's in the kitchen," Ila muttered.

Lon left the room and Steve watched Ila. He didn't know whether or not to believe anything of what he had said to her, yet what would she be doing alone with someone like Anton Arn? In this mad place anything was possible.

Lon returned, looking worried. "Annie's not in the kitchen." He raised his voice, calling her. There was no answer. Lon hurried across the room into the wing containing the bedroom and bathroom.

Ila said, "Steve! She couldn't leave the kitchen without passing through this room or going out the back door."

Lon was back almost at once. "She's not there," he said shrilly. "Ila, where did she put her coat?"

"We both took our coats off in the kitchen."

There was a concerted rush for the kitchen. Ila's coat lay over the back of a chair, but there was no other.

"That little fool!" Lon's voice sounded strange. "I told her not to move a foot away from me or Steve. After Jim Venning tried to kill her, I knew—"

"Is that why you killed Venning?" Steve broke in. "Why didn't you tell me?"

LON wasn't listening. He had kicked open the back door and was staring down at the deep impressions of two feet in the otherwise smooth blanket of snow. Suddenly he was racing into the night.

Steve started after him. At the door a frigid blast hit him, and he realized he couldn't go out without a coat.

He swept past Ila into the living room. From hooks on the wall he removed a heavy mackinaw, fur gloves and a woolen hat. He already wore a pair of Lon's hunting pants and boots and two flannel shirts. He checked his automatic and dropped it into his pocket.

Ila had followed him into the room, and she had found a repeating shotgun somewhere. She wore her raccoon coat and woolen kerchief, and in her left hand she held a three-cell flashlight.

"You're not going," Steve snapped. Then the pathos of her frightened face touched him. He added, "There's sure to be danger."

"I'll be in greater danger if you leave me here alone." She came closer to him and looked up at him. "I don't think they want me to live either."

The feeling that she was using her beauty to mislead him brought back his distrust. "Did Anton Arn change his mind about you that quickly?" he asked.

"Yes," she said simply. "Please, Steve, you've got to take my word that I'm on your side."

Pretty women are always dangerous. They can twist a man's mind until he isn't sure of anything. Yet if she were being honest with him Steve knew he couldn't leave her unprotected.

"Come on," he said.

Lon's deep, broad tracks mingled with those made by Annie. She had skirted around to the front of the house and taken the narrow, side road. The ending of the blizzard had cleared the sky and let a clear white moon through, so that they could manage without flashlights if necessary. It was necessary now, for one of the killers might be lurking nearby.

The tracks led to the county road. There they joined a jumble of at least two other pairs of feet. It seemed to Steve that Annie had gone first, then Lon, then the other two; but he was no tracker. The important fact was that they all pointed in the same direction—toward the pointing murdered man.

"She's getting too close to Anton Arn's cabin," Steve observed. He turned sharply to Ila. "Maybe that's where she set out for?"

Ila dropped her eyes quickly and said nothing.

Steve fought down an urge to slap an answer out of her, and started walking again. It was easier going through snow already trampled by four pairs of feet.

They rounded a bend in the road and saw two lights a short distance ahead. One of them, a gently swaying lantern, showed Steve the snow-covered mound which was his car. Men were standing at the side of the road, where Steve had found the murdered man.

"Careful," Ila whispered. "One of them is Anton Arn!"

There were three men, all staring in their direction. Steve gripped his automatic, keeping it in his pocket to protect his hand from the numbing cold.

"That's Doc Raynor," Steve said, "but I don't think he can give us much protection in a pinch. You stay here."

"No. You might need me."

He glanced at her. There was assurance in the way she carried the shotgun. She might be the real thing at that.

Side by side they went forward. The corpse was exactly in the position Steve had seen it, except that most of the snow had been brushed away. Ila emitted a little cry at the sight of it, and he felt her sway against him.

Only one of the three men appeared to be armed, and he was the one Steve had never seen before. He was as broad as Steve, but much shorter. Frost glistened on his shaggy mustache. Nonchalantly his rifle covered Steve's approach, as if it happened to be pointed that way accidently.

"Steve!" Doc Raynor said. "We heard that you came back to Witkill for a second visit."

Doc Raynor had always made Steve think of a flabby, middle-aged woman. He was mostly hips, and his puffy face was hairless. He was the only man Steve had found in Witkill with an ability for conversation and poker.

"Steve Garth, eh?" the armed man grunted. "We was just about to start looking for you. We're glad to see you."

"Steve, this is our sheriff, Archie Preston," Doc Raynor introduced. "You know Anton Arn. He tells us you met before."

Arn looked across to Steve, with that face of his as frozen as the countryside. He was a bundle of brown fur huddled into himself. He ignored Ila completely. Steve glanced around to her and saw that she, in turn, was ignoring Arn.

"Well?" Sheriff Preston demanded. "What have you got to say about this murdered man?"

"What am I supposed to say?" Steve asked.

"That's your car, isn't it? You had to notice him if you got out of it here. You went over to Mr. Arn's house and you didn't say a word about it, or ask to use his phone to call the police."

"He wasn't hospitable enough for much conversation," Steve said.

"Don't think you city shamuses can come up here and be smart," the sheriff growled. "I know your kind. The state gives you a license to carry a pistol, but not to use it any way you want."

Arn said tonelessly, "It seems clear, Sheriff. This man obviously knows Ila Touhy well. She's his sister-in-law's sister. Noel Jones was extremely fond of Ila, and this man, Steve Garth, found it convenient to murder him!"

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"THAT'S not true," Ila said hotly. "I never met Steve Garth before tonight."

"That's what you say." The sheriff waved a hand toward the seated, pointing corpse. "Noel Jones wanted to marry you, didn't he?"

"Supose he did?" Ila flared. "I refused him."

Steve said, "Now just a minute, Sheriff. If you're looking for the murderer, why not try Anton Arn? He sent one of his servants, Tell, to kill me. Then his other servant, Keeb, tried to shoot down my brother and his wife and myself."

The ghost of a smile flickered across Arn's mouth. It was the first time Steve had seen that face show anything at all.

"Obviously he's trying to cover himself by lying," Arn said. "It is true Keeb exchanged bullets with this man, but only to save his own life. He happened to walk into Lon Garth's barn, just as the two brothers were burying Jim Venning whom they had murdered. They tried to kill Keeb to keep him quiet."

This was bad, Steve knew. His denial of the murder would only make it worse, after the sheriff dug up the corpse in the barn.

He said quickly, "Look at the corpse pointing directly to Arn's cabin. Mightn't he, at the last moment, have pointed to his murderer?" It sounded pretty feeble when he got it out.

The sheriff grinned sourly and turned to Doc Raynor. "What do you think of the idea, Doc?"

"Impossible." Doc Raynor clucked his tongue. "Assuming that Noel Jones didn't die at once from his wound but froze to death, he would have grown weaker by degrees—sort of slid off into sleep. His arm would have dropped off the birch stump. I would say that his arm and pointing finger had been arranged that way—immediately after he died."

"Precisely," Arn agreed. "By Steve Garth, in order to shift the crime to me. Everybody in Witkill knows that Jones was a close friend of mine."

"I don't say it was Steve," Doc put in. "I got to know him pretty well the last time he was here. He's a mighty fine fellow."

Despite his warm socks and boots, Steve's feet were beginning to freeze.

It added to his irritability. "Look here," he clipped, "I know the law. You haven't a bit of evidence to pin this on me."

"Garth hated me for the same reason he hated Noel Jones—" Arn's monotone started up again—"Ila has been visiting me in my cabin—"

"I visited you, but—" Ila looked at Steve appealingly. "Anyway, that's beside the point. I tell you I never met Steve Garth before tonight."

Sheriff Preston said stolidly to Steve, "Maybe you did it, maybe you didn't. But you came across a murdered man, and didn't report it. I have to look into this Jim Venning matter. If you're innocent, you'll get out soon enough."

Steve strode angrily to within two feet of the sheriff. "You can't take me in! My brother and his wife are somewhere about, and Arn's two killers are after them. I'll promise that I'll give myself up tomorrow."

The sheriff snorted. "With the river half an hour away, and Canada on the other side. You think I've lost my mind?"

Without warning Steve brought his left up in a savage uppercut into the sheriff's rugged jaw. Through his glove he felt his knuckles crack. The lawman keeled over backward and went down full-length on his back.

Ila cried: "Don't any of you move!"

Anton Arn was bringing his hand out of his pocket, and it froze there as Ila's shotgun centered on his midriff. Steve had his automatic in view, keeping the sheriff down with it. Doc Raynor was rubbing his flabby chin nervously.

"Sorry, Sheriff," Steve said. "I don't like to hit the law, but finding my brother and his wife is more important."

Together Steve and Ila backed down the road. The sheriff was sitting up now, but he did not dare to reach for his rifle, which rested on the snow. Doc Raynor and Anton Arn were careful to keep their hands in view. Then Steve and Ila turned a bend in the road, and plunged in among the trees.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Baited Trap

A THIN crust of ice had formed over the snow, and they had to lift their feet high to make any headway. In a short time lack of breath forced them to slow down, but they could not afford to stop. They were leaving a trail which a blind man could follow.

"What are we going to do?" Ila panted. "The sheriff is following to arrest you, and Anton Arn and his servants will be looking for us to kill us."

"You said Annie may have gone to Arn's cabin," Steve interrupted. "You go home and I'll skirt around to it."

She shuddered. "I'm afraid to be alone, anywhere."

"There'll be more danger where I am."

"I can handle this gun well. Didn't I keep Anton Arn from shooting you?"

"Thanks," he said dryly. "Maybe it was his life you saved. I could have plugged him before he got a chance to shoot."

For a while there was no sound but that of their feet, breaking through the ice-crust. Then she said, "I should hate you, but I suppose I can't blame you for not trusting me."

"You're the girl friend of too many shady characters. First, Anton Arn; then Noel Jones, who Arn admitted was his pal."

"But Noel meant nothing to me," she protested. "Anyway, didn't Anton Arn or his servants murder Noel?"

"I doubt it. They wouldn't have left the body so near the cabin."

"Then you think somebody else—Lon perhaps?"

"No. Lon's a poor actor. He was genuinely surprised when I mentioned finding a body on the roadside."

"Then who?"

"How should I know? Even you, who insist you're on my side, refuse to tell me anything."

"I can't—yet," she whispered.

"Then beat it," he snapped. "Go home. You're either with me all the way or—"

A shot rang out, clear and sharp. Ila leaped close to Steve and grabbed at his arm. Then the scream came.

Steve was in motion at once, and Ila stayed close behind him. Trees were thick, here, but moonlight streaming down through the leafless branches made their flashlights unnecessary.

It did not seem that a human throat could hold that scream so long. Steve tired to distinguish whether the voice belonged to a man or a woman, but he could not tell. It was closer than he had thought, directly in front of them now.

Abruptly, it cut off.

Steve reached for Ila.

"Careful," he whispered. "It came and went a bit too mechanically.

"It was Lon or Annie," she wailed.

He held her tightly, muttering, "Wait!" A vast elm was directly in front of them. Past one side of the trunk Steve could see a flat clearing, on which the snow sparkled under the direct light of the moon. On the surface of the snow was an irregular patch of color.

He dropped his right glove into his pocket, pulled out his gun. The cold wrapped itself about his bare skin, biting into it. He ignored the sting as he stared at something like a fat brown snake beyond the coat. Near it was a boot, half-buried in the snow.

Ila was tugging at him frantically. He led her around the elm and they saw Annie.

Like a skeletal finger pointing at the moon, a solitary tree stood in the clearing. Annie's arms were fastened behind her around the crooked, barkless trunk. Her hair, cascading from her drooping head, covered her face. Her feet and ankles were out of sight, covered by the snow.

Ila's voice exploded in cracked sob. She pulled away from Steve, leaped forward. He snatched at her arm, and yanked her back against him.

"It's a trap," he warned.

"But she's freezing to death! They tied her there to die."

Steve held her fiercely. Beyond the tree he could distinguish another coat, but from this one extended a head and feet and arms. A dead or unconscious man sprawled out. Lon probably. . . .

"Listen to me," he said. "As soon as we step into the open, we're done for. Annie couldn't have screamed like that, neither could Lon. This is a trap—baited with Annie."

Ila sagged against him. "But we have to do something . . ."

HE TOOK a few precious seconds to reflect. "The killer must have spotted us when you cried out, so he won't give us a chance to come up behind him. And there might be more than one—we can't take the time for stalking. You stay here and blast away at any movement among the trees."

He went to the last tree before the clearing, and dropped to his hands and knees. The moon-washed night was utterly breathless. He started forward, boring his way through the snow.

He was halfway to Annie when a gun slammed. Steve dropped flat in the snow, wondering how the killer could have missed him in the moonlight.

Ila shouted, "On your left!"

She was down on one knee, pumping the repeating shotgun. It was she who had shot, Steve realized thankfully.

There was nothing but stark, somber

trees on the left of the clearing. He began crawling again.

He kept going to the left. Moonbeams glinted on the blue length of a gun barrel protruding from the side of a tree. Steve threw one shot at it, then went down flat, covered by the snow. The boom of two other guns overlapped each other—the killer's rifle and Ila's shotgun. A slug plucked at Steve's cap.

Next time he wouldn't be so lucky. The killer had the trees and the night to protect him, and Ila wouldn't always spot him in time to spoil his aim.

Then there was a shot that seemed no louder than the sharp snapping of a twig. It was, Steve thought dully, a weapon of smaller caliber than any he had heard that night.

In the woods on his left somebody chuckled. "You can stop playing mole, Steve. He's not going to annoy anybody any more."

Doc Raynor's broad-hipped form waddled into sight, his hand almost hiding the tiny revolver he carried. Sheriff Preston was advancing from the other side of the clearing, swinging his lantern and rifle.

Steve jumped up and ran to Annie, and saw that, like Noel Jones, she was frozen.

"Maybe you can save her, Doc," he yelled, and went on to the second figure.

It was Lon. Steve turned him over on his back, wiped snow from the face. It was as cold as Annie's. But that broad chest was still rising and falling. He ripped open the coat, and the flesh under Lon's clothes was still warm. Fortunately only a few minutes had passed since Steve had heard that first shot which must have been the one that had wounded him.

Ila was weeping. Steve twisted his head and saw that Doc and the sheriff had cut Annie loose. They'd wrapped her in her coat.

"She's been dead for some time," Doc was saying solemnly. "It's not the worst way to die. She simply fell asleep."

"Lon's wounded," Steve called.

Raynor and the sheriff came over. Doc made a quick examination. "Just a couple of ribs creased, but it will be fatal if we don't get him out of the cold."

"My house is nearest," Doc said. "You take his feet, Steve."

Together they carried Lon. The sheriff returned to where Annie's body lay and eased it over one shoulder. Slowly the grim procession started. Ila walked at Steve's side, no longer weeping.

"How did you and the sheriff come into this?" Steve asked Raynor.

"You left a trail as broad as a highway. Both you and the sheriff are my friends, so I figured I'd go along to keep you two from hurting each other. We heard that unearthly scream, then the shots. We saw you crawling in the snow, and poor Annie tied to the tree. The sheriff and I started to circle the clearing in opposite directions, to try to come up behind the unseen gunman. I was the lucky one. This little pistol of mine can do a neat job at close range."

"Who was it?"

Before Doc could reply, Steve saw the answer. They had stepped in among the trees, and behind one of them lay Tell's long thin body, a bullet hole in his left temple.

Steve turned to the sheriff. "Now do you believe what I said about Arn and his servants?"

Sheriff Preston snorted. "I don't believe anything till I'm sure. Arn wasn't around. Anyway, murder is murder, even when it's a feud with you and your brother on one side and Arn and his servants on the other. You're still under arrest."

"While Arn and Keeb are free?"

"I'll take care of them," the sheriff clipped, "after I put you where you can't kick the law around. And don't think I'm forgetting that sock you gave me."

From behind a tree, Keeb appeared. The slender revolvers looked like cannons in Keeb's small, gnarled hands.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Store Room

NONE of them had a chance. Doc Raynor, who was nearest the dwarf, was holding Lon's feet, while Steve held Lon's shoulders. Both of them had dropped their guns into their pockets. Ila's hand was nowhere near the trigger of her shotgun, and Sheriff Preston was carrying his rifle and the lantern in one hand, while his other steadied Annie's body.

They were frozen figures in a frozen world of which Keeb did not seem a part. In his piping child's voice Keeb said: "Doc, you killed Tell. You said so."

Lon's feet dropped from Doc's grip. "Keeb, listen. It was all a mistake."

"Put down those guns!" It was the sheriff, giving an order.

"I'm gonna kill Doc," Keeb stated.

"You can't get away with it," the sheriff argued. "I'm Sheriff Preston."

Keeb nodded. "I know who you are. You was gonna go after me and Mr. Arn next. I heard you. Well, none of you is gonna do nothing but die!"

Steve said, "Wait! We can make a deal." He released Lon's shoulders.

"Deal nothing," Keeb squeaked. "I can shoot these two revolvers like a machine gun, and I'm gonna start right—"

Steve drove his shoulder into Doc's back and sent him crashing against the dwarf.

Keeb, however, could think quickly enough when it came to physical action. Instead of pumping a bullet into Doc and being momentarily impeded by the falling body, he sidestepped. But he forgot that his feet were buried in snow. The ice-crust snarled his legs; he staggered.

That moment was long enough for Steve to go for his gun. He had it out of his pocket when Keeb recovered his balance and swung his twin revolvers into position.

Ila's shotgun roared. It had been necessary only for her to slip her finger up to the trigger. But in her anxiety, the shot was hurried; buckshot dug at Keeb's shoulder. He shrieked and spun, and then Steve's sight was blocked by Doc Raynor's body. Doc had not quite fallen; in the attempt to maintain his balance, he had thrown himself backward, in front of Steve.

Cursing harshly, Steve thrust Doc out of his way. Keeb was fading behind a tree, part of him still visible. Steve snapped a shot. Keeb howled and vanished.

Everybody was yelling at once. Ila was pumping her shotgun and the sheriff had dropped Annie's body.

Steve hurdled Lon's unconscious body and tore after Keeb.

Ila shouted, "Come back, Steve. He'll get you in the woods. He can't escape—the sheriff will go after him with a posse."

Steve kept going. If he returned, the pig-headed sheriff would consider it his first duty to clamp Steve Garth in jail for safe keeping.

Keeb, with a dose of buckshot in his shoulder and a .38 slug in his side, wouldn't be able to shake him off. Possibly the dwarf might still have the use of his right hand, but that was all right.

KEEB'S trail weaved through the woods. Twice he had gone down on his hands and knees, and here flecks of blood were visible.

The front corner of Anton Arn's cabin appeared suddenly; a moment later Steve saw the dwarf—a flash of him going through the front door.

Steve went to the nearest window, and peered through the pane. There were no lights in the big living room, yet moonlight enough trickled through the windows to reveal the shadowy outlines of furniture. One of the shadows moved, and Steve placed a careful shot through the pane. The shadow jumped and settled to the floor.

Steve raced around and kicked in the front door. No shot came. He saw Keeb at the far end of the room, swaying against the door through which Anton Arn had come earlier that evening.

"Are you finished?" Steve asked.

The dwarf shot, without seeming to move his right arm. The bullet came close enough for Steve to feel its hot breath, as his own automatic blossomed flame. Keeb fell sideways against the inner door. It crashed open to let him through, and then swung shut.

Hugging the walls, Steve approached the door cautiously. The dwarf's resistance to bullets and buckshot was uncanny. Had he had enough life in him to push the door shut? Or was Anton Arn in that room?

He listened at the door, but heard nothing inside. Then he shoved it in. Electric light poured through. No bullets came—no sound of any kind.

It was a well-furnished living room, empty. From Steve's feet a line of scarlet ran to the center of the room.

He examined the windows and found them all fastened from the inside. The door through which he and Keeb had entered was the only way out—unless there was a trapdoor.

He spent time on his hands and knees, searching; then methodically tried the pine panels on the walls. Minutes ticked away. He found it at last—a pine knot near the door. A trapdoor slid open, and a staircase leading to a lighted pit yawned in the floor.

From where he stood, Steve could see the dwarf's huddled form at the foot of the stairs. Every nerve alert, he descended. All four walls of the cellar room were covered by ceiling-high shelves, on which were stored large bundles wrapped in brown paper.

Keeb was alone down there—or rather, Keeb's body.

Steve rose from the corpse, went to the nearest bundle and ripped the paper. That bundle, as well as all the others, contained pure wool blankets.

Abruptly he tensed again. Someone was moving upstairs. Anton Arn?

Steve went to the side of the stairs and looked up. He saw a pair of small snow-covered boots and the lower half of a raccoon coat.

"Ila?" he called softly.

"Steve!"

The boots started down, then paused as the girl saw Keeb's body.

"Where's Anton Arn?" she asked.

"I don't know, but I'll find him. Is the sheriff with you?"

She said, "We carried Lon to Doc Raynor's house. He recovered consciousness when we got there. The sheriff left to gather a posse—in order to round up all of you. I came here because—well, I thought you might need me."

"How thoughtful," he said dryly. "Come on down."

Gingerly she came down.

Steve pointed to the torn bundle. "Woolen blankets smuggled across from Canada and stored here until they can be disposed of."

"I know," she said.

His eyes were bleak. "Of course you do. How deep are you in this?"

SHE touched his arm, pleadingly. "Now that Annie is dead, I can tell you. Before she married Lon she was—well, Anton Arn's girl friend. She was part of this smuggling. She was foolish and wanted nice things, I guess.

In a way she cared for Arn. Then he grew tired of her, and on the rebound she married Lon. That frightened Arn. She knew too much and he was afraid that she might talk to Lon. The fact that Lon had a brother who was a detective made him seem more dangerous.

"Arn tried to keep Annie quiet with threats. She knew what sort of people he and his accomplices were, and she was afraid that they might kill her. She confided in me, and Lon overheard. He did a reckless thing then, but you know how Lon is. He went to Arn and said that he'd kill him if anything happened to Annie. So Arn knew that Lon knew. I was afraid of what would happen, so I sent that wire to you, signing Lon's name."

"You could have told me this before."

"I didn't dare. After all, in spite of the fact that Annie had reformed, she was as guilty of smuggling too. Neither Lon nor I nor Annie were sure what you'd do about it. You might have turned her over to the police—"

"You were with Arn tonight. Don't forget that."

"You won't let me forget it," she retorted bitterly. "I thought I could persuade Arn not to harm Annie. That's why I was here tonight. I overheard your conversation with him, and I realized it was too late to prevent trouble."

"He had already sent Jim Venning to eliminate Lon and Annie," Steve pointed out.

"But I didn't know that! He said he wouldn't harm Annie if I"—she dropped her eyes—"would be nice to him. When you and Tell left, he went into another part of the house for a few moments and I grabbed my coat and ran out."

"But about Annie," Steve said. "Knowing Arn had sent Venning to kill her, would she have gone out alone?"

"But don't you see how she felt? It was because of her that Lon and you and me were in danger. She must have gone to try to plead with Arn once more."

"Yes," Steve muttered. His face softened; he smiled down into Ila's face. "I guess I acted like a heel, Ila. After all, it was pretty plain you were on my side all along. But what about Noel Jones? Was he part of Arn's smuggling gang?"

"Yes. But I didn't know until Annie told me."

"Why was he murdered? Lon was too busy with Jim Venning to do it—Say, when you walk through the ice-coated snow, every step is like a pistol shot!"

"I don't understand."

"Come on. We've got to get going."

A toneless voice said, "You are going nowhere. Drop your gun, Ila, and you, Garth, keep your hands in the air!"

Anton Arn was stretched out on one of the broad shelves behind them. He had pushed aside a bundle of blankets, and now his head and shoulders were in view. A pearl-handled revolver was levelled at Steve's back.

"I had time to arrange for a suitable hiding place when I heard you upstairs," Arn said. "I was about to shoot you when Ila arrived. My position wasn't exactly comfortable, but your conversation was very interesting."

With his knees he kicked another bundle to the floor and stood up. Pressing the revolver into the small of Steve's back, he reached around and extracted the automatic from Steve's pocket.

"Your shotgun, Ila," Arn said. "I promise that I shall kill neither of you at once if you do as I say."

The gun slid from Ila's fingers.

"You refused me your favors once tonight," Anton Arn's monotone went on. "Perhaps if I leave Garth tied up down here, you will be . . . nice to me."

"Don't, Ila!" Steve rasped. "Sooner or later he'll kill us anyway."

Arn stepped away from him then. He

didn't intend to give Steve any chance to get his powerful hands on him.

Steps sounded above them. "Anton?"

Arn's revolver tilted up to the descending feet.

The hips that appeared could belong only to Doc Raynor.

"Doc," Arn said. "What is it?"

Doc Raynor's pudgy hand opened, and his tiny .22 pistol appeared, lined in an angle above Steve's head. The pistol coughed. Anton Arn pitched forward.

Doc came on down the stairs.

"I always prided myself on my marksmanship with this little gun," he said.

Steve went over to where Anton Arn lay. He bent to take the pearl-handled revolver from the dead man's fingers.

"The sheriff wouldn't want you to touch the body," Doc instructed.

Steve bent lower.

"Don't!" Doc barked. "Unless you want a bullet in your back!"

STEVE straightened and turned. Doc's flabby face was creased in a smile, but there was death in his eyes. Ila looked from one to the other in bewilderment.

Doc said, "So you've guessed, eh, Steve?"

"What have you done to Lon?" Steve demanded.

"So you know that also?" Doc sighed. "After the sheriff left, I threw him into the snow. My story will be that he grew delirious, crawled out, and froze to death. I'll say that I came here after Anton Arn had killed both you and Ila, and that I then shot him to death."

"Doc!" Ila cried. "What are you saying?"

"Not even Annie knew that Doc was part of the smuggling gang," Steve said tightly.

"Part?" Doc Raynor clucked his tongue. "I was the brains. I was the one who got the blankets across the river from Canada. Anton only disposed of them in American markets. But he was hoggish. He was planning to push me out. It was a foolish thing to do. Without me, the organization was nothing. I could—and will—start another one.

"I used my head. It suited my purpose to use the hatred between Lon and Anton. I figured that if Anton found the murdered body of one of the men, he would think that Lon had done it, and the war would start. I did not know then that it was unnecessary, because Lon had already killed Jim Venning, who'd been sent to kill him. Really, I should be grateful to you and your brother for helping me dispose of them."

Steve was watching Ila now, knowing that he was losing her almost as soon as he had found her. He would try to get Doc, of course, but doubtless Doc would shoot at the first move. In that small room even a .22 slug could be deadly, as Anton Arn's death proved.

"Aren't you going to do something?" Doc mocked. "It's not pleasant to shoot in cold blood."

Steve did not stir a muscle.

Doc shrugged. "We have a few minutes more. I'm curious to know how you came to suspect me."

"The way you killed Tell," Steve said. "He must have been a bundle of nerves, waiting to get a shot at me as I crawled in the snow. The slightest sound would have seemed like an explosion to him—especially your feet breaking through the crust of ice. You had to get pretty close to be effective with that pop gun of yours, and he let you, believing you were on his side."

As he talked, Steve thought he heard a scraping overhead. He listened while his words flowed, and he watched Doc's face. Doc was mildly amused by what he was saying and appeared to hear nothing.

There it was again—like somebody dragging a weight over the floor. . . .

Steve had continued talking, without pause for breath. His voice rose louder, to drown out the sound.

"Then Keeb hating you more than the rest of us. He knew that you were double-crossing the gang by having killed Tell. I admit I didn't see it clearly until a few minutes ago, and I wasn't absolutely sure until Anton Arn let you shoot him. He could easily have got in the first shot while you were coming down the stairs."

Doc frowned. "Why are you shouting? What—"

A body fell through the trapdoor. The knees hit the steps halfdown down, but the thrashing arms flung themselves about Doc and yanked him off his feet.

Steve was there in two jumps. He clamped his hands around Doc's right wrist and twisted. Bone snapped, and the .22 fell from limp fingers.

Steve stepped back. There was nothing else for him to do. Lon's big hands were fastened around Doc Raynor's fat throat and no human strength could make them relax. "For Annie! For Annie!" Lon was gasping.

When it was over, Lon sank back against the stairs. "It took more than what they did to kill me," he panted weakly. Then he passed out.

A few minutes later they had Lon stretched out in front of a roaring fire in the living room. Steve had done what he could for Lon's wound. Ila had phoned the police and a doctor. Lon was sleeping now; he would live.

"Lon was right," Steve muttered. "We Garths aren't easy to kill." He stared down at his sleeping brother, with a tenderness he had never felt before.

Then he turned to Ila who was waiting for him to take her into his arms.

THE END

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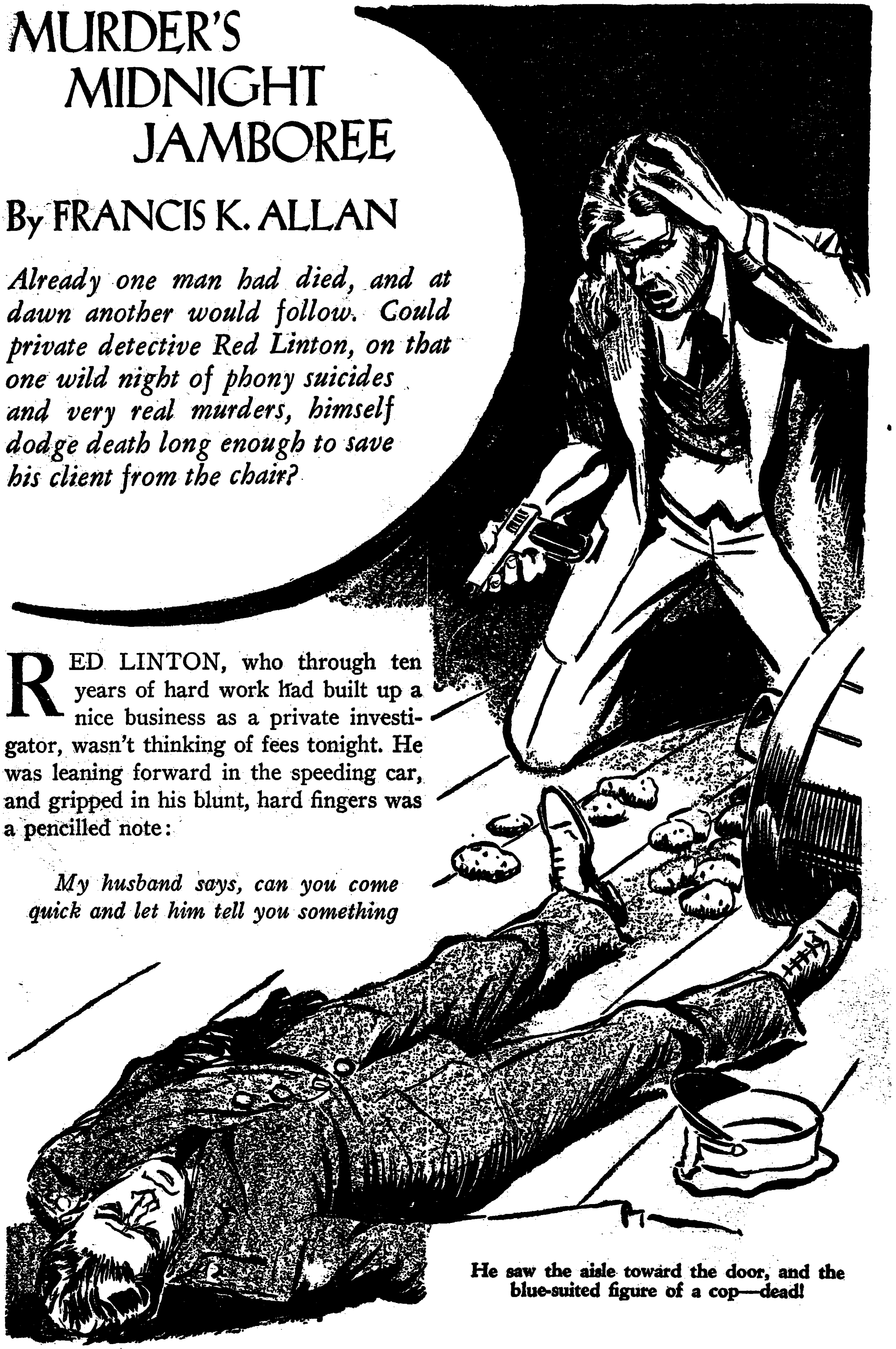
MURDER'S MIDNIGHT JAMBOREE

By FRANCIS K. ALLAN

Already one man had died, and at dawn another would follow. Could private detective Red Linton, on that one wild night of phony suicides and very real murders, himself dodge death long enough to save his client from the chair?



He saw the aisle toward the door, and the blue-suited figure of a cop—dead!

RED LINTON, who through ten years of hard work had built up a nice business as a private investigator, wasn't thinking of fees tonight. He was leaning forward in the speeding car, and gripped in his blunt, hard fingers was a pencilled note:

> *My husband says, can you come quick and let him tell you something*

before he dies? But you better come right quick, cause he's all burned to pieces, and he don't want Paul Carruth's blood held against him when he dies. We got the third floor back rooms over the Lantern Grill on Fourth. You better hurry.

Mrs. Ed McGhee.

Red Linton pulled his eyes from the scrawled words and glanced at his watch: eight-thirty. About nine hours to dawn—nine hours before Paul Carruth started his last walk to the chair: an innocent man burning for murder. This roughly-penciled note, from a woman Red had never heard of, was the plea of a man who did not want to die with blood upon his hands—the blood of Paul Carruth, the brilliant young scientist whom the law called a murderer.

"Let me out at the corner." Red stared into the shadows of the ill-lit street as the cab went racing on. Old six story buildings here—shops at the bottom, ragged rooms at the top: human traps.

The cab screamed to the curb. Red shoved a bill to the driver, and slammed the door behind him. Ahead, a glowing neon lantern hung outside a walk-down bar: The Lantern Grill. His steps became slower as he drew near, and his eyes searched the upper building. Somewhere there on the third-floor back, was a dying man, who had to talk.

Red glanced down as an arm brushed his. He saw the upturned, searching eyes of a girl as she moved past. His eyes trailed her on as she moved to the curb. She stopped. Red watched as, slowly she opened her purse. In the shadows, he caught the glint of bright steel. Her hand lifted toward her temple.

With a blunt gasp, he woke. A gun was in her hand—pointing to her temple! Suicide!

He leaped as the gun exploded. She swayed, and he caught her. For the moment, the dry odor of burned powder mixed with a delicate perfume. The scent of her hair was close against his cheeks, then he felt something in his hand. Hard, cold steel was forcing itself into his fingers. A small hand was folding his about the gun.

Then the girl's scream pierced the night.

"Help! Help! He's killing me! Help!"

The shrill voice woke the dark street. Red jerked away, staring at her. There was no bullet hole in the girl's temple, merely a trace of powder-burn. And the gun was in his hand, forced there by her fingers.

"Help! He's killing me! Help!"

Somewhere a door slammed; windows rattled up. Voices answered her cries, all in an instant too snarled and tangled for Red to understand. Then she jerked loose.

Suddenly a hard hand gripped Red's shoulder.

"This way," a twisted whisper urged. "This way for safety."

"But I didn't—" Red started angrily.

"Come at once . . . this way," the whisper repeated anxiously.

Red stared, trying to see whose hand gripped him. In the darkness there was only a lean, grayish face; a stooped, powerful body, and a hand covered by white silk gloves.

Then a shrill whistle blasted close by. Heavy feet sounded.

"At once! There has been a mistake," the gray man explained.

The girl was gone, disappeared into darkness. The cop was coming. The gun was in his hand! Blindly Red turned, following the guiding hand up one half flight of stairs. They paused a moment, while something moved sharply in the white-gloved hand. There was a crash as the glass of a door shattered, then the hand turned the lock from within.

"One moment," the voice spoke. There

was a click. A light blazed in the room. It was a small grocery store, Red discovered.

"Down," ordered the whisper. The gloved hand pointed behind the counter. Red stooped and caught a glimpse of the white-gloved hand flashing at his head. The blow caught him just above his ear, knocking his legs into jelly. The light dimmed into a blank haze, and sounds trickled through . . . like bird calls across a rushing river. . . .

Something moved his fingers—the gun being removed. There was a rattle. A heavy voice wandered through the daze; then the close, rocking blast of the gun came again. A low, long sigh filled the room, and a board creaked as a limp weight setled down. Then the steel of the gun was hard in Red's fingers again. Swift steps faded, leaving unbroken silence. . . .

◆

BLINDLY Red struggled to sit erect. The blow still vibrated through his skull, the mist still clouded his eyes. Yet through it, he saw the aisle toward the door, and the blue-suited figure of a cop—dead!

Red forced his mind to stumble backward. There had been a shot. . . . His eyes slipped down. The gun was in his hand: a gun of murder, forced there for a second time tonight.

He and the dead policeman were alone —the gray man had vanished!

Trapped! Red thought. The answer burst through the haze: Framed for murder!

Outside the door, a face appeared. A second person rushed up, gesturing wildly, then raced away. After the police, Red realized.

Suddenly he twisted about in his sitting position. The front door was out, and there was a barred window at the back. He gripped the counter and pulled himself up. Blindly he swayed while a flood of nausea filled him; then, with a blow of the gun, he shattered the light.

He stumbled toward the back window, pounded with the gun, knocking away the glass. He gripped the bars and strained. They creaked. He braced and pulled again. With a tearing rasp, the rusty sockets came loose. Swiftly Red kicked the gun under a counter and let himself down outside where the dim light from windows above revealed a square court, bounded on all sides by the six-story walls. And the exit ran back into the gathering crowd. . . .

Red found the fire escape, and went up to the first landing; the second; the third —on up and out onto the roof. There he stopped, searching the darkness.

The outline of the adjoining building took shape. He worked his way across the roofs, down to the last building of the block. There, on the street side, he found a fire escape, leading to the walk below. Quietly he slipped down and dropped the last span.

At the corner of Fourth Street, he peered toward the grocery store. People were milling in front, and he knew that the path to the dying McGhee was locked. Somewhere a siren was wailing.

An innocent man would die at dawn while he, Red Linton, ran from an iron-clad murder set-up. *Why? Why?* The question beat his dazed brain mercilessly. Why the girl's faked suicide? Her screams for a useless assistance? A girl he'd never seen before. And a gray, stooped man in white, silk gloves, who'd led him into a trap and left him, senseless, to be caught for the gray man's crime.

Red shook his head and wiped his face on his sleeve. Something scraped his cheek. There, clinging to his coat button, was a broken gold chain. At the end swung a miniature locket.

The girl's, he realized; caught when

she jerked away. Well, it was a clue.

He pulled it loose from the button, crammed it into his pocket. Around the next corner, the red light of an approaching squad car cut the street. Quickly Red turned into the shadows and walked away. The noise dropped behind him, and the silent streets swallowed him into their darkness. On he moved, block after block, in the sharp air which cleared his head, leaving only a throbbing ache and the endless question: why?

At a safe distance, he caught a cab.

"Archie's Cafe on Ninth," he ordered. Archie's was as good a place as any, if you had to hide. He snapped on the overhead light and took out the gold locket. Pure gold, he saw. He snapped open the tiny clasp—his eyes froze.

The miniature portrait inside was that of the girl in the shadows. A smiling, symmetrical face; young and pretty—and familiar somehow. Somewhere he'd seen that face. . . .

The cab pulled up before the dim lights of Archie's. Hurriedly Red slipped out and inside the door. At the desk he stopped.

"I'm not here. I don't care who's hunting me," he ordered softly.

Archie's face remained inscrutable. Red started to turn, then paused.

"Has Turner been in tonight?"

Archie shook his head. Red thought, Turner knows everybody, in a way. And sometimes he doesn't talk. He might know the girl. It was a chance, he decided.

"Look," he said, "when he comes, tell him I want to see him. But he's the only one, see?"

Again Archie's face gave a mute agreement.

Red was finishing his second beer when the door of the private booth opened. The swaying figure of Turner, the Herald's perpetual drunk, stood there.

"Archie said—" Turner fumbled thickly—"Let's have a drink!"

"Listen, sit down!" Red pulled him into a chair and squatted beside him. "Can you see?"

"Sure! What you want to see, huh?"

"Look at this." Red drew out the locket and pushed the catch. He held the tiny picture close before Turner's eyes. "Look at that. Who is she?" He spaced his words carefully.

"That?" Turner sighed disgustedly. "You can't get no date with her! She's rich—rich, see?"

"Who is she? That's all I want to know!"

"She's—" Turner's weaving finger settled majestically on the picture. "She's one of the deb—debutantes, coupla years ago. Debutante, see? No date, old man," he mourned. "Gotta be rich to get a date with a debutante."

"A deb!" Red stared at Turner's bleary eyes. "You're drunk!" he exploded. "You don't know who she is!"

"Whatta ya mean, I'm drunk?" Turner glared. "I'm never drunk! She's a debutante," he repeated stubbornly. "Yessir. Her name's Patty Amherst!"

"Patty Amherst," Red echoed. He gripped Turner's arm. "Are you positive?"

"Sure! That's her. Lives in a big house,

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out by the hospital, see? I'm positive."

"Wait!" Something clicked in Red's mind. "Is this Patty Amherst the stepdaughter of old Doctor Bergheld? The one who used to be head of that big white hospital?"

"That's him, sure! See, I know! Now, you buy me that drink."

Red flipped a bill on the table. "Sorry I can't wait to join you," he called back. "I'm going to see if you have to be rich to get a date with a debutante."

◆

FROM Archie's, it was a twenty minute taxi ride to the quiet, secluded parkway in which were found the sprawling white wings of The Cargile Hospital and Sanatorium. Just beyond the low walls which enclosed the hospital grounds was a huge brown-stone house. Red let the taxi go past while his eyes slipped over the windows, the darkened doors. One light was burning in an upper room; another in a lower hall. The rest of the house was dark.

"So there," he mused, "is where my screaming girl friend lives."

At the next corner, he paid the driver and waited until the cab pulled away. Silently he went back along the walk to the Bergheld house. Keeping near to the dark hedge, he slipped down the side drive to the rear. There were two back doors, one lighted, opening on a walk to the garage; the other dark, evidently leading into the kitchen.

Red tested the lock, then drew out his ring of keys. At the fourth fitting, the lock moved smoothly, and he stepped inside a service porch. He crossed a kitchen, listened at the butler's pantry. There was no sound through the house. Cautiously he opened the swinging door and entered a dining room.

Keeping near the wall, he mounted a stairway and came into the upper hall. Around the L, the line of a single light was etched on the carpet. Red moved forward cautiously, until he stopped outside. He listened. At first there was only silence; then the muffled sound of slow footsteps—light steps; a girl's, perhaps.

He drew a breath and touched the knob. Silently he widened the crack. His nerves leaped. There was the same girl whose fingers had pushed a gun into his.

Now, she was walking slowly back and forth. One hand moved to push the loose waves from her face. The other hand was held, nervously, to her throat.

Red closed the door behind him, and tip-toed half across the room.

A board creaked. The girl turned, a flood of white washing her cheeks. Her dark eyes widened in a moment of open terror. Then a stubborn mask returned to her face.

"Who are you?" she asked coldly. "What do you want?"

Carefully Red came on; and the girl retreated before him, back against the wall. There she stopped, waiting stiffly. Her wide, dark eyes never wavered from his face.

"You remember me," Red asked.

"I never saw you," the girl said icily. "Get out! Get out, before I have you arrested."

"That's the second time tonight you've lied," Red answered flatly. "The first time you said I tried to kill you. Now—" his fingers gripped her shoulders, as he pulled her close to him. "I came to find out why you tried to frame me for murder."

"I've never seen you! You're insane! Get out!" Her voice was hard and clear, but beneath his fingers, her shoulders were trembling.

"No, I'm not getting. You framed me for murder, and I'm not worth two-bits till I get the story from you. I want it now."

He felt her tremble again. Relentlessly

his voice drove on: "Because of you, a cop was killed tonight. Because of you, I'm hiding like a rat, while a man is dying: a man I had to see. Without that man's testimony, another man will be electrocuted at dawn." His fingers bit into her flesh. "Because you screamed, a man is dead, and two more may die!"

"Oh, stop—stop—" she cried brokenly. "I don't know you. I don't know what—"

"The lady does not know you," came the clipped words behind Red. He whirled. There waited the stiff, tall figure of a butler, correct in tie and tails: immaculate, even to his shining bald pate. And a short black gun was waiting also, in the butler's hand.

"I repeat," he said sharply, "the lady does not know you." His free hand gestured. "Allow me to show you the door." But there was no courtesy behind the ice of his words.

Slowly Red's breath collapsed. His feet moved, following the butler's gesture. The door shut behind them, and they moved on toward the stairs, the gun hard in Red's back.

"You have disturbed the young lady," the butler said.

"I asked her a question," Red retorted angrily.

"That was unfortunate. Your question had an emotional appeal."

"You mean, you got there just in time. A minute more, and I'd have broken her down."

"Perhaps." There was a touch of irony in the word. At the lower hall, the gun directed Red back toward the rear.

"I thought you were showing me the door," Red said.

"One is not crude before the lady. You understand."

"Sure. I'm really not leaving?"

"Precisely. We shall go down here." They stopped before a small door, and the butler fitted a key. The door swung back, a light snapped on. There were steep, narrow stairs leading down into a cellar.

"Continue," the butler ordered in that soulless tone.

Red drew a slow breath. Something whispered through his mind; once down those steps, he'd never come up again. He stepped, listening to the padded shoes of the butler behind him. Carefully Red gathered his muscles. His foot balanced for a step, then he whirled, throwing himself backward toward the butler's knees. His arms swung up in a blind roundhouse blow.

THE gun exploded. Splinters of dry wood crackled against Red's face; but his arms and knees hit home. He felt the body sway, and plunge. A leg smashed his head in falling, then a solid, fleshy weight thudded on the concrete floor below.

Red regained his balance and stared down at the once immaculate figure of the butler. He didn't have to look again to know the man was dead.

Slowly he followed on down, looking about the cellar. At one end was the furnace, the coal bin beside it. He found a door opening into the concrete wall at the side. He stooped and inspected the lock, then drew the keys from his pocket. For long moments he worked before the bolt moved. His fingers touched the switch inside.

As the light gleamed, Red's breath drained away. There was a long narrow room before him, and in the center, a heavy table. On either side were instruments of a complete laboratory: glistening steel and glass, vats, funnels, glass-enclosed instrument cases, scales. Bookcases lined part of the walls.

He moved down one side of the table to the other end of the room. There, set in the concrete wall, were two small doors. On one was the brief inscription:

To be removed Thursday

Thursday, Red reflected: Two more days. What was to be removed Thursday? Swiftly he selected another key, opened the door. Behind it was a low, dark, cell-like room; and a heavy metal tub set on runners.

Red pulled, and the tub slipped out. There was the slushing sound of liquid. He lifted the lid and stared inside. His breath caught sharply.

There, within that vessel, were the remains of what once had been a man, submerged in acid.

Suddenly Red understood what the inscription meant. By Thursday the last remains of the body would have been ready for removal and burning: the tub would have been cleaned.

Slowly Red let the lid down and pushed the tub back into the cell. He closed the door and turned back down the long room. At the far end by the door was a coat-hangar. There hung a stained smock, a clean apron and, on the desk beside it, were four pairs of white silk gloves!

The recollection flashed back: the man who'd drawn him into the grocery store; who'd slugged him; who'd killed the cop and left him to pay. That man had worn white silk gloves!

A nerve tingled in Red's throat. Here, somewhere among these instruments was the answer to more than a framed-murder. But what? The question was like a light, flashing on and off. Somewhere here, Red realized, was his only hope of final safety.

Quickly he moved back to the body of the butler and pocketed the man's gun. Then he dragged the body to the coal bin and propped up the lid, hefted the bulk over the edge and dropped it inside. Then he closed the lid and dusted his hands.

He went back into the laboratory, stopped at the desk. There, ranged to the ceiling, were books; huge loose-leaf binders; some ragged and old; some newer. On the backs of some were titles scrawled in long hand: Cancer: Investigations 1924-25 . . . Cancer: Investigations 1925-26 . . . on down until 1932. There the series ended.

There were other books of research and theory, in German, French, Spanish. Red's eyes narrowed. A set of three bore the title: THE CONTROL AND CURE OF CANCER, by Dr. Phillip Bergheld.

A sound upstairs caught Red's attention. Someone moving—

Swiftly he pulled the door shut. His eyes raced about, finding at last a closet. He snapped out the light and felt his way to the door, slipped inside and shut the door behind him. There he waited while the sounds drew nearer. Someone coming down the cellar stairs; a key grating in the lock; then the light blazed on in the laboratory again. Red looked out through the crack.

There he was! The gray, thin-faced man of the Fourth Street nightmare.

HIS cheeks were gray and ashy. His shoulders were stooped and powerful; his eyes, black and hard. On his hands were white gloves, dirty now, but white silk gloves they were, nonetheless.

As Red watched, one hand drew the glove off the other. As it dropped away, Red's eyes froze. That hand! It was a brown, burned claw. The nails were gone, the flesh was burned and shriveled, making the fingers almost useless.

The other glove came off, to reveal a similar hand. From the table, the man selected a clean pair of gloves, fitting them into place over the twisted fingers. He sighed, a dry sound that shivered through the room. Slowly he put on the smock and moved to the little doors at the far end of the room. Red shifted and widened the crack of the door.

The gloved hand fitted a key to the lock and pulled the tube from its dark cell. A slow, flat smile traced the gray lips, then the man pushed the tub back again.

"Almost done," he murmured softly, and locked the door.

He fitted a key to the next door, pulled out a second tub. Then he turned to a cylindrical drum set on a rolling carriage. Carefully he wheeled it to the vessel and fitted a glass pipe to a tap at the bottom; then he placed the nozzle of the pipe inside the tub. Red heard the trickle of flowing liquid as the tap was opened.

Deliberately the gray man moved among his tubes, selecting first one, then another; taking each back and pouring the contents into the filling basin. At last he was done. He disconnected the pipe, pushed the tank carriage away and looked down at the mixture he had created.

He turned to the desk and took out a ledger. Laboriously he fitted a pen into his stiff fingers and began to write. Moments ticked on, and only the rasping pen broke the brittle silence. All the while, from the open tub a slow-curling fume rose gently into the still air.

The pen ceased scratching. The man returned the ledger and glanced a last time at the tub. Then he hurried out, closing the door behind him.

Swiftly Red slipped from his place and took down the ledger. He flipped through to the last used page.

> *Solution completed: 1:45 a.m.*
> *Decomposition begun:*
> *To be removed: Sunday, 6 p.m.*

Red stared. He'd been right. Someone was going in that acid!

Decomposition begun. . . . He checked the vacant space. Who? When? Curiously he flipped back to the previous pages. His eyes touched upon a name: Carruth. Paul Carruth—the man he'd started out to save.

Feverishly he read the lines, and slowly, his breath tightened. Before him, on two neat pages, lay the plot-work of Paul Carruth's framed crime. Step by step, each detail meticulously planned.

Suddenly something clicked in Red's mind. Paul Carruth's situation had been almost identical to his own: Paul, found dazed in an alley, a dead man beside him, the death gun clutched in Paul's fingers: A clear-cut case of murder. The dead man had once had trouble with Paul, nothing much, but the state had played it big. Only one small thing had made Red doubt the verdict: the tests did not prove that Paul had fired a gun. Now, Red knew he hadn't.

And now Red knew who had—the gray man with the gloved hand, had framed Paul Carruth, just as he'd framed Red.

A SOUND brought Red out of his reverie. Swiftly he returned the the book, and went back to his place in the closet. The steps came nearer. Voices were talking. As the door opened, Red recognized Patty Amherst with the grey man.

"But I don't like to come down here," the girl protested.

"This is the last time I'll ask you," he assured softly. The key rattled, locking the heavy door.

The girl turned at the sound. "Do you have to lock the door, father?"

"Let me be the judge of that." So the gray man was Dr. Bergheld, Patty Amherst's step-father.

The doctor moved to the little doors, and opened the cell which contained the remains of the man. "Come here, Patricia. This will interest you."

"I don't want to come anywhere," the girl countered stiffly. "You know I hate this place. I want to go back upstairs. You said they'd phone news about Paul."

"Ah yes, the news about Paul." He tilted his head, and his black eyes fixed themselves on the girl's face. "I can tell you now, there will be no news of Paul. None till dawn, that is."

"What—" The girl gasped, her dark eyes widened. "You—you mean, he's going to die? You didn't get the reprieve, after all you made me do?"

"You're quite stupid, Patricia," the man said coldly. "That detective whom you—shall I say, embarrassed this evening—that detective was Paul's last chance. And, as I had planned, you spoiled his errand."

"You lied to me! You told me—"

"I told you the detective was on an errand to disprove my reasons for getting a postponement of the execution. You believed me, and you played your part well. That detective who might have saved Paul is now being sought for murder. And—" his voice drew lower—"my former chauffeur, who might have given him some information, is dead. I saw to it."

For a long moment the girl's eyes held to the gray face before her; then her whisper came: "You—you murdered that man they say Paul killed! You did it! You wanted Paul to die—"

"Indeed," the doctor agreed. "Now you see everything."

The gray lips twitched on a smile. "You remember these." He moved to the desk and touched a set of loose-leaf volumes.

"Paul's," she whispered. "Paul's investigation of cancer."

"They were Paul's. Now they're mine!"

"You can't! You couldn't! I'll tell. Dr. Michaelson will tell—"

"Dr. Michaelson, indeed . . . come!" One gloved hand turned her toward the little cell at the back. He lifted the lid from the vessel and gestured, sneering, "You think Dr. Michaelson will tell?"

The girl screamed; her hands covered her eyes quickly, and she stumbled back against the table, sobbing.

The doctor held out his hands, pulling off the gloves.

"Look at them!" he commanded. "Ruined! Ruined by the stupidity of an intern's error! Who did it? You know the answer. You remember: Paul Carruth, who spilled the acid . . ."

He paused for a moment. "Nine years, and every day of those years I've remembered, waiting."

"He—he didn't mean to—"

"Mean to!" the doctor snarled. "What does meaning count, when a career is ruined? And now what does he do? Like a yelping jackal, he shouts his new investigations, disproving my work in my own field, wrecking me—"

"But he proved you were wrong. He wasn't trying to wreck you. He had to. It was medicine. You can't—"

"You loved him!" the doctor threw at her. "That was my one salvation. He told you everything. And you told me! Now, before his work is known, he dies. His associate, Michaelson, is dead. I have their conclusions. Everything becomes mine!"

"You can't!" the girl screamed. "Oh, I hate you," she sobbed. "I've always hated you! You're not human!"

"The way you hate me," the doctor said softly, "is only a fraction of how I have despised you. Year after year, day after day, cooing the wisdom of Paul Carruth in my ear. How great he's going to be in the field where I am greatest!"

The doctor regained his calm. "All the while, you've served a purpose, just as your mother's money served a purpose for me. Without you, I wouldn't have known when to strike; nor when his work was ready for me. Without you, even tonight, Paul still might have lived. But now he will die. And so will you. I have a second tub of acid prepared."

THE hypnotism of blank horror held her stiff. She could only stare at the waiting vessel; at the now thinning fumes that shimmered to the ceiling.

"You—you couldn't," she whispered.

"But I shall," the doctor said.

"Will you?" Red snapped out the

question as he stepped into the room, the butler's gun poised in his hand.

"Who are—" the doctor started shrilly; then bleak recognition crept across his features. "You," he whispered.

"Me," Red agreed. "You should have slugged me again. Since you didn't, I'm taking you in for murder. How many is it? That cop tonight; Michaelson there; the guy Paul Carruth's supposed to have killed; and McGhee, who wanted to talk to me."

The gray face twisted into granite lines. The twisted fingers came creeping up.

"Don't move," Red snapped. "You're just ugly enough to scare me into shooting." He gestured to the girl. "Move back this way. Slow, now."

Dazedly she followed his instruction.

"This time you can holler murder if you want," he said. "Take these keys. Open the door and go call headquarters." He shifted the gun, and pulled out the keys. "This one," he instructed.

"No, you don't!" There, in one of the brown fingers was a thin glass vial.

"You and your gun," came the doctor's whisper. "Shoot, you helpless fool!" he tormented. "As you do I'll throw this. Look at my hands! Think! One drop of this in your eyes—a splash on your face . . ." He laughed shrilly, wildly. "Both of you! Move if you like! Shoot if you like!"

The doctor laughed, seeming to sense the futlity in the other's heart.

"I had not planned for two," he spoke raspingly. "But there are always ways. Perhaps it will be a little crowded, two of you in one tub. But not for long." He laughed again. "Each day, you will be less: each day a little smaller. . . And soon, before many days, I shall be able to hold you both in a tiny box in my hands. Then a fire in the furnace . . ."

Red stared at the vial while the words wore on.

So thin, so small a tube—and the brown hand kept moving, trembling. One shot—a chance in a hundred, and a miss meant death. Yet, even as he thought, Red's right hand was tightening.

The last moment slipped away. Red fired, throwing his arm across his face as the gun kicked up.

One instant passed, then a scream shattered the silence. Red's eyes opened. The vial was shattered, the contents emptied over the cheek and shoulder of the doctor.

Red could only stare at the threshing motions. Then, suddenly, he froze.

The doctor plunged against the waiting tub; his body pitched off balance. For one long moment, like a crazy humpty-dumpty, he hung on the rim, then plunged into the acid.

Red spun, catching the girl as she swayed. He held her, closing his eyes to wipe away the image of that last sight.

"Take—take me out—" the girl sobbed.

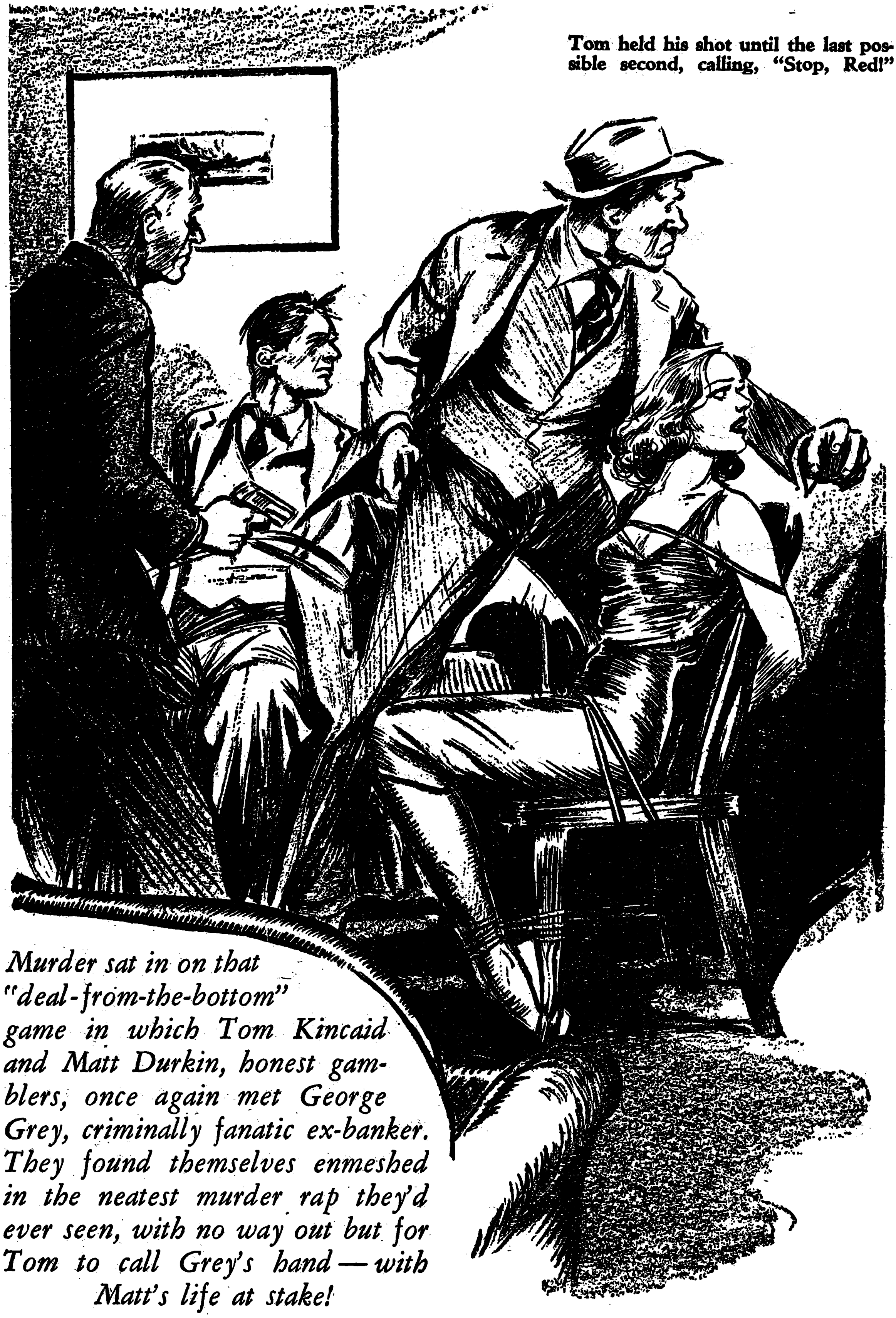
"Yeah. . . Let's get out." Red swallowed thickly. He picked up the keys where the girl had dropped them, and unlocked the door. As she passed him, he stepped back inside. From above the desk, he took the book wherein the doctor, trained in medical precision, had so carefully charted the death of Paul Carruth. He tucked it under his arm, and snapped out the light behind him. Together, he and the girl went up the stairs and out of the cellar.

As they came into the clean-smelling hall above, Red looked at her carefully.

"Don't feel bad," he said softly.

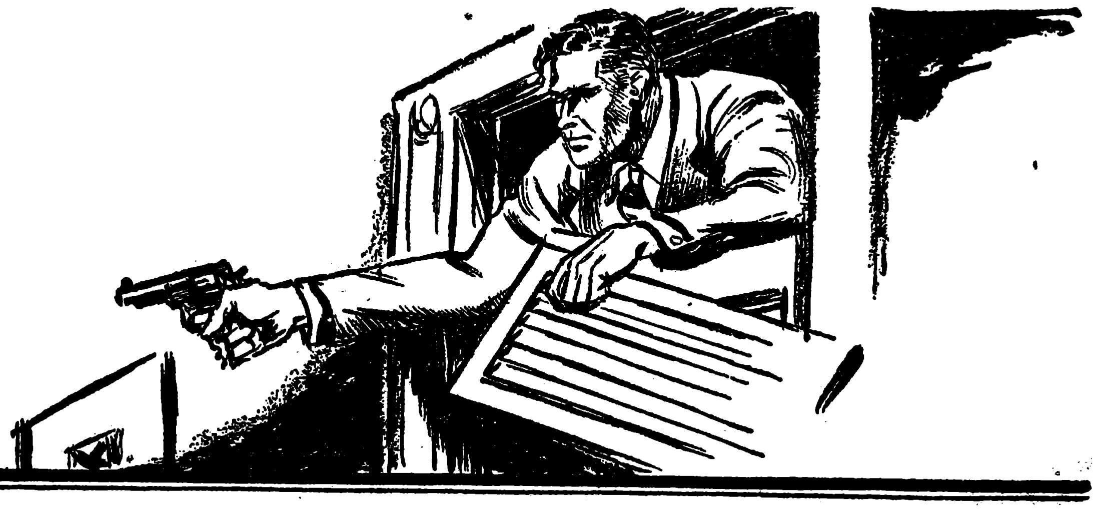
"I don't. Not any more," she answered. "It was just—just the way he looked—"

"I know," Red agreed. "I'll tell you what—" He looked at his watch. "It's just two-thirty. That's a long time till dawn. Why don't you mix a drink, then we'll call the governor. Maybe, by breakfast, you'll be talking to Paul."



Tom held his shot until the last possible second, calling, "Stop, Red!"

Murder sat in on that "deal-from-the-bottom" game in which Tom Kincaid and Matt Durkin, honest gamblers, once again met George Grey, criminally fanatic ex-banker. They found themselves enmeshed in the neatest murder rap they'd ever seen, with no way out but for Tom to call Grey's hand—with Matt's life at stake!



MURDER RAISES THE ANTE

Another Thrilling Tom Kincaid and Matt Durkin Novelette

By WILLIAM R. COX

CHAPTER ONE

Death Deal

TOM KINCAID shrugged his sloping, fighter's shoulders and stared at his friend. Matt Durkin's handsome, tight features were wrapped in thought. The little man was dapper as ever, but there were lines etched deeply into his boyish face.

Tom said, "There are seven million dollars right in this lobby. We could use some of it."

The Mammoth Hotel at Miami Beach was perched dangerously close to its neighbors, to the water. New, imposing, it housed money from every walk of life. It even housed Chino Galbert, who was making his way towards the two gamblers who sat in overstuffed chairs, watching.

Matt said, "Oh-oh! The kingfish."

Chino was a stout, quietly-accoutred man. He could have been a banker, or a President of Rotary. Actually, he was a "big boy", which means he was sponsored by a gambling syndicate and carried a bankroll, which he was ever eager to increase, over a gambling table.

China said, "Spotted you clear across the room. How about a game?"

"With you and who else?" Tom asked.

Chino laughed smoothly. "The suckers are slim, Kincaid. I thought we'd have a game just among ourselves—Bill Badger and Hymie Platnick are here—"

"Too many smart guys!" groaned Matt.

Chino made a gesture. "You know how it is. No use kiddin' ourselves. We can keep it clean. We'll all deal off the bottom!"

Tom said, "I furnish the decks then."

"Sure! Everyone knows you're square. It's on the level, Tom. We're loaded with a couple grand each."

Tom hesitated. If they all dealt off the bottom, marked cards were out of the question. Matt's keen eyes could detect any sleight-of-hand tricks. He needed money badly, right at the moment.

Matt was saying, "Chino, you guys sleep comfortably on corkscrews every night of your lives. We don't—"

"We'll play," Tom said abruptly.

Chino nodded, satisfied. "Room 489. In about an hour," he told them, and went away.

Matt said, "Dog eat dog. I don't like it, Tom. It's probably a plant. George Grey—"

"We can't keep running," Tom cut in grimly. His big hands opened and closed. He was a six-footer, and he weighed almost two hundred pounds. Running away did not suit him.

Matt said, "Poison in New York, after the bullet I got in the leg. A knife in Philly. A long-range rifle in Jax. And Grey is in Miami, still looking for us, with half the rats in the country at his call."

Tom said, "I'm not running. Anyway, Chino is with the Graham mob. They don't go for murder."

"Murder," echoed Matt softly. He shivered in his immaculate white dinner jacket.

Tom said, "Let's go upstairs. Maybe Snakey's got a report for us."

Snakey Collins was a holdover from the days when Tom Kincaid had controlled a syndicate—the only honest gambling syndicate in the country. He'd been a monte dealer in the west. When George Grey, ex-banker, millionaire, had muscled into the underworld, and the Kincaid empire had fallen, Tom's men had scattered. Snakey had come to Miami, and was working undercover for him.

Tom and Matt had a room on the seventh floor, and Snakey's was just down the corridor. They rapped on the door, in the pre-arranged signal. There was no response.

Matt muttered, "It's nine o'clock. He should be in."

Tom put a hand on the knob, turned it cautiously. The door was open. Tom went in fast, one hand reaching for the pearl-handled .38 which was his constant companion these days, and he saw Snakey in the middle of the floor.

Tom said, "Shut that door, Matt!"

There was a knife in Snakey's chest, a long-bladed, butcher's knife; but Snakey was still alive. Tom raised the white-faced man, while Matt brought a wet towel and sought frantically for liquor.

Snakey opened his eyes. He was a thin, reedy fellow, with a beaked nose and a stubborn chin. He croaked, "They. . . got me Tom . . . Red the Goon . . . The Main . . . radio, Tom . . . all over hell 'n gone. . . ."

He slumped. Matt poured whiskey from a pint bottle. Tom managed to get some of it into Snakey's throat. The man choked, coughed a bit. "Somep'n big, Tom. . . . Heard 'em. . ! Mammoth . . . 'at's hotel . . . But more'n that . . . . Mammoth . . . . mammoth . . . . mammoth—"

That was as far as Snakey got—ever.

Matt stared at the dead man a moment. "Grey is in the hotel," he stated softly.

"Yes," Tom said. "He's in the hotel—with plans apparently."

"That game's a plant, then."

"Yeah," said Tom. "Let's go find it!"

◆

ROOM 489 was at the end of the hall. Tom tiptoed past the door and went to the window. There was a fire escape, and a wide, outdoor stairway, used by bathers during the day. It led down to an open yard. Other hotels crowded in upon it, and music made known the presence of the Tampania Club—a night spot—two doors away.

Matt jittered a little. Matt's nerves, hitherto iron-like, were frayed, Tom knew. Even he could feel the strain. It was like being surrounded in a jungle by unknown enemies, directed by a murderous, canny headman.

George Grey, unknown to police authorities—his background was that of a respectable business-man—was an enemy to be reckoned with. Twice Tom and Matt had defeated him, yet he had destroyed Tom's fortune, made him spend the savings of years to gain those victories.

The police were no help. Tom and Matt couldn't be stool pigeons. Living in a half-world, as square gamblers, they had no standing in courts of law. It was a single-handed fight for them. Tom shrugged and rapped upon the door of Room 489. Perhaps it would come to an end here, he thought.

Chino was all smiles. Hymie Platnick and Bill Badger were veterans, dour-faced, somber, resembling more than anything small-town business men on the loose.

Chino chuckled, "An honest game among thieves! Take off your rings, boys, and no box-matches on the table. Order the cards yourself, Tom, so you'll know they're all right. Call the desk—call any place you want."

The others said nothing. Tom and Matt exchanged glances, aware that the trio in the room had hooked up, all right. Chino was too agreeable; he was striving too hard to be honest.

Tom ordered the cards from the cigar store in the building. Even the Mammoth desk might be fixed, he knew. Markers wouldn't help the dealing in a "bottom card" game, but the backs of hole cards in stud could be read by experts like these men.

They broke the new decks.

Matt's eyes were quicker than light itself. No one could ring in cold decks with Matt watching, of that Tom was perfectly sure. The five men arranged themselves about the table.

Before a hand was dealt, there was a hurried rap on the door.

Chino said, "That must be George! He said he might be able to play!"

Tom pushed back his chair. Matt almost dropped a card on the floor—a heinous crime in that company. Chino bustled to open the door.

George Grey walked into the room, beaming with amusement, his hawk eyes intent upon Tom, his thin lips spread in a tight, confident smile. He was a gray-haired man with a slight bulge to his waistline, attired in a business suit of dark brown.

The man behind him had flaming red hair and a moustache, and wore dark glasses. Red the Goon was hulking and bowlegged, and wanted by the New York police.

Chino said, "Mr. George Grey, a regular guy. You know Bill and Hymie . . . You ever met Tom Kincaid, the square gambler? And Matt Durkin, his eyes?"

Grey said lightly, "We've met before. Haven't we, Kincaid?"

"Yes," said Tom. "Yes—we've played poker together."

Chino was acting the officious host, hurrying to make drinks. Grey's sharp, bright eyes kept coming back to Tom. The other men were relaxed, impatient to get into the game. Red the Goon sat with his back to the window, tilting his chair against the wall. Red was to be a spectator—and bodyguard.

Matt was breathing hard, muttering without moving his lips, fingering the deck of red-backed cards. Tom kicked him gently on the ankle. Matt stopped muttering, but his gaze kept jerking between Grey and the Goon.

Chino said, "Well, let's get started. It'll be midnight before we know it. First jack deals."

Matt flipped the cards. His hands were small and well formed. He threw each card from the bottom of the deck. The jack fell to George Grey.

It was a screwy setup, Tom thought. Chino seemed on the level—that is, there was no apparent connection between him and Grey. On the surface it appeared to be a game among the wise gentry, with Grey sitting in as the sucker. Grey dealt clumsily from the bottom—he was no mechanic, all right. He hired his gamblers—and his murderers.

Tom spread the corners of his cards. He didn't have players, so he watched, without words, without the flicker of an eye. This poker game between crooked gamblers, conceived on the surface as a prank with business behind it, was assuming the aspects of a set-up for murder—the murder of Tom Kincaid and Matt Durkin, those stumbling blocks in the triumphant crime-march of George Grey.

Chino slapped a thick wad of bills on the table in front of him. "Let's go," he said. "There's my stack. Don't anybody touch it! Y'all know my one superstition—money on the table in front of me!"

George Grey dealt the cards. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Lady Sits In

IT WAS shortly after midnight. Matt was feeling the strain of watching four men and playing cards at the same time. Tom was weary, trying to think of possible angles in Grey's entry into the game. Chino was winning regularly. On Chino's deal, either Badger or Platnick won. George Grey was losing, steadily.

It was being done, somehow. Tom thought he knew, but he couldn't be sure. Grey was undisturbed by his losses, and there was nothing to tie the ex-banker in with Chino and his two pals; nothing that Tom could figure, at any rate.

Tom himself was winning. He was staying out of hands dealt by Chino. His cards had been good, and his expert playing had netted him over two thousand dollars. Matt was also ahead.

The false note was Grey's cynical cheerfulness, his unnatural calm. Grey was a hard loser; Tom knew that of old.

It was Chino's deal again. The stout man was all smiles and rapid conversation. The stack of bills in front of him was thicker now. He said, "A hand of stud for the boys? Just a little gamble with Chino!" He was a talking-gambler. He made no attempt at concealing emotion, but his acting was very good.

Tom got up and went for a drink, passing behind Chino's chair.

Chino finished the deal, and carefully restacked his pile of bills. Coming back, Tom glanced swiftly down over Chino's shoulder. The stout man had a trey showing for his first card.

Grey had an ace. He bet fifty and Badger called. Matt droped out, but Tom stayed with a queen. Tom had a jack under. Platnick dropped, but Chino played.

"Off the bottom, boys!" Chino chortled. "Strictly legit!"

His fat fingers did not seem very clever. But Matt's toe, under the table, pressed against Tom's shin. Tom watched the ten fall on his jack-queen, and said nothing. Grey drew a king and bet another fifty. Badger stayed. Tom stayed.

Chino said, "I paired!" He had a ten showing. He raised a hundred. Grey hesitated, a strange look in the dark eyes. Then Grey said quietly, "I'll play."

Badger dropped. Tom said, "I'll stay."

The other ace fell slowly down on Grey's cards. Tom was ready to quit, then. Too many cards in his potential high straight were showing on the broad. But the nine hopped down, leaving him open on both ends, king or eight. There were no eights showing on the table.

Chino drew the trey. His possibilities now were three of the trays, or tens and threes. Grey, on top, said cooly, "I'll bet a thousand and scare out the fish-peddler," staring insolently at Tom.

Tom said, "I call the big, bad mans!"

Chino said, "Now, now! Play nice! I raise another grand!"

There was a bead of sweat on Chino's brow. This was the big hand, Tom knew. Matt was getting loose from the table, his eyes glued to Chino's fingers.

Grey said, "Another!"

"I call," Tom clipped. He was over his head and he knew it, but this was the payoff. With Badger and Platnick out, and Chino dealing, anything could happen. If Chino had to throw a card—if he could throw a card, right in front of everyone—it might not be to himself. He might be forced to throw it to Tom. If something had gone wrong, forcing Badger and Platnick out, if Chino had screwed up the deal—anything could happen!

The bead of sweat ran down Chino's sunburned face. He held the cards loosely in his left hand. He dealt.

Grey drew nothing to help. Tom held his breath, watching Chino. The eight fell to Tom, completeing his straight!

And to Chino—the three of spades!

◆

THE silence was thick enough to cut with a knife. Grey leaned back in his chair. His eyes were baleful, now; but he said nothing.

Nat's hand flicked out with the speed of a striking snake. It reached past Platnick, slapped at Chino's wad of bills, and revealed a bit of sparkling glass.

Matt said sharply, "He hides the shiner in the pile of bills. Then he deals Greeks."

Tom nodded. "Pretty clever, Chino! Get the boys into an 'honest' game, then deal second from the bottom, watching the cards with your little shiner. An ancient gag! But you had a new hide-out for the shiner! I've known you were up to it for half an hour!"

He tossed the speck of mirror onto the table. Chino was stammering, pale despite his sunburn. Platnick and Badger were pushing back their chairs, feigning indignation. Everyone, even Matt and Tom, had forgotten Red the Goon.

Grey's voice came alive. He snapped, "Hold everything!"

Tom and Mat whirled. Red and Goon held an automatic in each hand.

Grey held a flat, pocket pistol.

Grey said incisively, "This is perfect. This is better than framing you myself, Kincaid!"

Tom said mildly, "I don't get it, Grey."

"You will, Kincaid, you will," Grey sneered. "Red—move around, so I don't get into your line of fire. Chino—take the gun from under Durkin's arm, and the one from Kincaid's hip! Move!"

The fat gambler hastened to obey. He was sweating copiously with fear now. Grey picked up the two guns, replacing his own in his pocket. He said in a soft voice, suddenly amused again, "Sit down, Chino. Platnick—and you, Badger—sit down where you were. Don't touch those cards! Leave that mirror where it is."

The cold-bloodedness of the triple murder-frame broke upon Tom with blinding, horrible certainty. He said, "No, Grey! You can't do it! You can't kill them this way, man!"

"Get your face to the wall, Kincaid! No one saw Red or me enter this room, this hotel. It will save me the trouble of killing you myself!"

Tom said, "Matt!" and went flying across the room.

Grey kept the muzzle of his own gun upon him, but did not fire. Matt came at

Grey. The banker stepped back with amazing agility, and sideswiped Matt with the pearl-handled gun. Matt went down, and out.

Red the Goon smacked Tom with both automatics. Tom got one hand on him, yanked hard. He felt cloth tearing in his grasp. Then another blow hammered against his skull and he went despairingly down into the well of unconsciousness.

He had time for the thought: This is surely the end. George Grey has triumphed at last—there's no way out of this. . . .

As he whirled into the depths, he heard the explosions. They did not seem very loud, but they carried a message of horror. George Grey, who so resembled a mild, middle-aged, retired banker, had turned fiend. . . .

The struggle through the black waters of lethargy was torturous, but Tom made an heroic effort. The hotel should be aroused, he thought numbly. Even the thick walls couldn't disguise the sound of popping guns.

He staggered to his feet, half-blinded. He had only been down for a short count, he figured, for there was no pounding on the door, as yet.

Matt was groaning. Tom picked up his small friend and supported him to the bathroom. Cold water on their faces helped a lot.

They moved back to the room. Matt said, "This is awful!"

Chino was slumped over the table. There was a hole in the middle of his forehead. Badger had evidently tried to get up, but a bullet had stopped him. Platnick had died in his chair, hopelessly, without moving.

Tom picked up his pearl-handled gun. There were two empty shells in it. Matt's small .22 had been fired once.

Tom said dully, "We've got to get rid of these guns. It's known that we were here, but without the cartridges, ballistics can't hang this frame-up on us."

Matt said, "Grey! Where—"

"The fire escape. He has a room here in the Mammoth. If I knew which room. . . . Come on, Matt."

There were noises in the hall. The hotel detective was now on the job, a trifle slow, but too soon for comfort. Tom shoved Matt to the window.

Matt started down, but Tom said, "No use. We've got to find our own room, if we can."

"They'll trap us! People must know we were playing with Chino! These games are never a secret!"

Tom said, "We've got until morning. Go on up, pal!"

They crept up the solid, steel staircase. On the seventh floor there was a window, half-open. Tom whispered, "This is as close as we can get. Try to slip through."

Matt went over the sill. Tom followed, careful of his bulk, striving to keep quiet. There was a brief gasp from the single bed, and Matt got to it quickly.

He said hoarsely, "It's a woman!"

Tom walked closer to the bed, where Matt was holding his hand over the mouth of a woman with blonde hair. Tom said gently, "Will you promise not to scream?"

The woman nodded. In the dim light her eyes were wide, but unafraid. Matt said, "Lady, I'm sorry. But we've been framed to a bad rap and we got to get loose."

"You're—you're Matt Durkin!" the woman gasped.

◆

TOM turned on the bed-lamp. Its soft glow revealed a woman of thirty, with bright blue eyes and warm, sun-tanned skin and teeth which gleamed like pearls. Tom said, "This is the first stroke of luck we've had in months."

"I've been looking for you." A shadow of pain passed across the woman's comely face. "I'm Joe Hazelton's widow. I was Mary Gordon."

Tom exclaimed, "Joe worked for me in Richmond!"

"He was killed," his widow replied bitterly. "Knifed. They said you would know who did it."

Tom said, "Yes, I know."

"I heard you were here," said Mary Hazelton. "A man named Maley tried to hire me to keep watch on you. I pretended to agree. I took this room on the floor with yours last night. I was hoping I'd get a chance to see you."

"Maley, eh? Red the Goon is a side-kick of the man who had your husband murdered—the man who framed us a few moments ago."

She said, "Shhh!"

There were footsteps in the hall. A door opened and closed. There were voices.

Mary Hazelton said, "In the bathroom! Hurry!" while she shrugged into her robe.

She left the light burning. The three of them huddled in the small room. The knocking came finally to her door.

She called, "Who is it?"

"House detective. There's been a little trouble. Have you seen or heard anything on the fire escape, ma'am?"

"No, I haven't seen a thing," she called back, as though it didn't matter in the least. "I'm taking a bath, officer."

There was a moment's silence. Then the detective said, "I'm sorry. I have to come in. I have a pass key I can use."

Before she could answer, the door opened. Mary Hazelton blocked the view of the bathroom by peering out. "You have no right to come into my room!" she cried. "You get out of here! I'll call the manager and have you discharged. . . ."

She kept at him, almost without drawing breath. The man went to the window, looked out, hastily retreated. At the door he said, "I'm sorry, ma'am. It's murder. . . ."

She never let up on him. Her tongue crackled until he had closed the door and retreated down the hall.

To Tom, Mary said, "The hotel will be surrounded."

"Yeah. But we don't want to get away. Not while Grey and Red the Goon are in the hotel."

"When the police get here," "she pointed out, "they'll come back to every room on the fire escape."

"That's right," said Tom. He reached into his pocket, drew out the piece of cloth he had torn from Red the Goon's jacket, and put it in an envelope which he found on the desk. All of his money went into another envelope.

He said, "Matt, take out some dough for expenses, and put your roll in here, too. . . . Mrs. Hazelton, if we get in trouble, will you use this to hire us a lawyer?"

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"We're not going to get you in Dutch," said Tom. "We'll be safer on the move.

Make a date to meet Phil Towne, that inimitable G-man, in our companion magazine, Ace G-Man Stories—on sale today! Read William R. Cox's great novelette FEED THE FEDS WITH HOT LEAD, a superb, action-packed mystery story that will leave you breathless.

Look—if we get killed, keep the money. I probably owed it to Joe."

She took the envelopes, whispereing, "If you get . . . . killed . . . . and you see Joe—say hello for me, will you?"

Tom said, "Yes. So long, Mary."

They went out in the hall, Matt ready with his gun. The coast seemed clear. Tom said, "The stairwell. If we could only find Grey's room."

"No chance," said Matt. They mounted the inner stairs, passed the tenth floor, the twelfth. They came to a narrower flight, leading to the roof.

At the top of this flight there was a sort of tiny penthouse vestibule. A storm door opened to the roof. Matt said. "The cops'll be over this like a tent. The first thing, they'll do is cover the roof.

Tom was trying a door. It opened, to reveal a mop closet. He stepped in among the pails and brooms. There were several long coveralls hanging from hooks. Tom tried the strength of the hooks.

He said, "Come on in."

"It won't work," Matt objected. "We'd be trapped in there."

There were noises below, which meant policemen taking charge. Tom said, "Come on in here!"

They closed the door, but Tom did not lock it. Matt said, "Are you completely nuts?"

"No. Get under those overall things."

Matt said, "Grey set us into a frame. Chino wasn't in on the details, but Grey had bought Chino and Platnick and Badger. When it fell that way, he crossed them. He'd cross his grandmother—"

"We know all that," Tom cut in. "I was thinking about Snakey—what he said before he died."

"Dying guys say funny things," Matt answered dubiously. "It didn't make sense, the way he kept repeating 'Mammoth'."

"Because you're thinking of it as the name of the hotel. Snakey said 'more'n hotel.' He said he 'heard 'em'—*then* he repeated 'mammoth'!"

Matt said, "Didn't he mention 'radio', too?"

"Of course! That's it!—Shhhh!"

There were footsteps outside. A gruff voice said, "Cover that roof. Shoot first and ask questions afterwards. These killers are tough!"

Tom whispered, "Up feet, pal," and Matt got the idea.

After a moment the voice outside said, "Open that closet."

Someone wrenched at the knob. A strong, flashing light poked in, sending its rays to every corner of the closet. Tom held his breath as he spread between two of the sturdy hooks, his feet doubled up. Hanging there, he tried to flatten himself behind the overalls, dust rags and aprons. It was easier for Matt, who was slight, but for Tom it was torture. The light probed for what seemed eternities.

Then the gruff voice said, "No use plowin' over all those pails and things. Nobody would coop up in there."

The light clicked off, the door closed. The voice went on, grumbling, "We can't cover every room in the place. The manager's raisin' hell now. Let's get down to those rooms off the fire escapes."

Another voice said, "Who we lookin' for, anyway?"

"There were seven guys in that room," said the first cop. "Three of 'em are dead. How do I know who the other four are?"

"The stoolies'll know. Never was a poker game the boys didn't know who played," said the other confidently, as the voices faded down the stairs.

Tom exhaled and let his feet touch the floor. His hands were sore from holding the hooks.

Matt whispered, "They don't know us. We can take a chance on prowling."

Tom squatted against the wall. "Matt,

do you think they found Snakey yet?"

"Not yet. He wasn't on the fire escape."

"Tomorrow they'll have every room opened," said Tom. "They'll pick us up on sight, because we're gamblers. But right now they haven't even read through the register cards. If we move fast . . . . Remember what Snakey said about radio. That's our clue."

"Snakey was always foolin' with radios. A hobby, wasn't it? He had a little set he used to carry all over."

"We got to get that set," Tom said.

CHAPTER THREE

The Die Is Cast

THEY could follow the police by the sounds of resentment as patrons were awakened and questioned. The manager was ubiquitous and annoyed. The gruff voice of the officer in charge became more and more irate, but in it was hopelessness, too. When the inquiring body had gone below the seventh floor, Tom asked, "Have you got some keys?"

"I always got keys," Matt said.

They went down the hall like a pair of ghosts. The door to Snakey's room was locked, as they had left it. Matt's clever fingers manipulated a slender pass key—the door opened and they were inside.

The faint aura of death was unmistakable. Tom hastily snatched a cover from the bed, and draped it gently over the grimacing features of Snakey Collins.

"There it is!" said Matt. "I've seen it a dozen times!"

Tom examined the small radio set. It was encased in a plain, metal box, without the ornate design of the commercial product. It was a piece of machinery, not a toy. Tom clicked a button, one of the numerous gadgets on the box.

A voice came through the speaker.

"Grey's voice," said Matt suddenly. "Snakey *did* hear it!"

They strained their ears. It was Grey's voice, all right—dry, incisive. But it seemed to be emitting the usual gibberish of the amateur radio fiend.

Tom said, "It's by inflection! Notice how he changes his voice!"

Then came the word, "Mammoth!" It was dropped into an almost unintelligible sentence which ended with: "Tampania, four."

Tom looked at his watch. It was three-thirty. The voice of George Grey went on, "All set. Everything fine. Signing off now, until tomorrow."

Tom clicked off the switch. He said, "Grey is branching out. He's planning something."

"But what?"

"Something to do with this hotel, with the Tampania Club next door . . . . with . . . . a raid! A big raid, on the hotels, the night club. There are thousands in the safes. There are jewels enough to ransom a couple of dictators!"

"But the cops—"

"The cops'll be thinned out by four o'clock. Do you think Grey would hesitate to kill the guards who are left? It's perfect. No one will be expecting it, on the heels of a recent murder!"

Matt said, "Maybe you're right. With enough men to swing it, it could be done, all right."

Tom said, "I'll call the cops. I know a detective here in town—Jim Gorse. He'll believe me."

He had almost picked up the house phone. He stopped. "I forgot this was Snakey's room," he said. "Let's go down to Mrs. Hazelton and let her call."

They again used the stairs. On the fifth floor, the coast seemed clear. Tom rapped on the door, with his fingernails, without making a great noise. The door opened quickly.

It opened too quickly. Tom cursed himself for his impatience and jumped back. Matt, off guard, stumbled against the door-jamb. A red, hairy hand reached out and snatched the small man, hauling him over the threshold, slamming the door in Tom's face.

George Grey's voice came through, low, but clear. "We have the woman. We have Durkin. If you make a bad move, Kincaid, you know what will happen to them. I'll settle with you later."

Tom said, "I'll settle with you before then, Grey!"

"Perhaps," came that dry voice. "In which case, we'll all be settled—for once and for all! But it will be most unpleasant for Durkin—and the woman."

Tom retreated. He went back up the stairs, into the room on the seventh floor, the room which held the dead body of Snakey Collins.

He sat on a chair, staring at the sheeted body. It was, he supposed, simple. All he need do was call the police and tell them that a gang would be moving in on the Gold Coast that night. But the police would get him, too. They'd have the underground information by now that he had been in the fatal poker game. So they'd get him—Matt and Mary Hazelton would die horribly.

It was all his own fault, Tom realized. Mary Hazelton had informed him that Maley tried to hire her, that she had pretended to agree. He should have known that Grey and the Goon would keep watching her—he should have been prepared for the contingency.

Tom Kincaid took out his pearl-handled gun and examined it . . . . fifteen minutes . . . .

He'd have to take a chance on Matt and the woman. If he could save them, he'd gladly sacrifice his own life. But first he must see Grey, to make sure. He could not trust that to the police. It was a job for no one but Tom Kincaid.

THE HOTEL was asleep at last. Coming down the wide escape, counting the landings with great care, Kincaid did not espy a single lighted window.

He wasted considerable time, he feared, stalking the fifth floor landing. He was almost sure that Grey would not be foolish enough to try to hold his prisoners in Mary Hazelton's room, but Tom had made one slight error that evening and was not chancing another. Finally he maneuevered himself through the window, into the room. His pencil flashlight showed him an empty chamber.

He searched the floor with extreme care. Near the door to the hall he found several tiny kernels of rice. He knew, then, that his guess had been correct—that Grey had dared to take Matt and the woman to some place inside the hotel. Matt and Tom had been carrying loose rice in a side pocket for a long time now, just in case they should be separated.

His watch said three-fifty-five. Tom went back out the window again, a dim shadow for all his bulk, going down to the ground.

He put one foot on the ground, peering about. There was a dim light at the back entrance to the Mammoth. Protruding into the little arc of reflected yellow which the lamp emitted, Tom saw a foot. There was a polished black shoe, and part of a cop's blue uniform. The toe was turned skyward.

Someone had been there first!

Tom flattened himself against the stone of the building. The Tampania Club was within view, and his watch pointed to four o'clock. He heard the tinkle of falling glass. There were men moving in the darkness, now.

Tom stopped trying to reason. He was, after all, a gambler, who acted upon hunch and impulse. He went straight to the Tampania Club.

One man stood guard, a hulking figure.

He challenged, "Who's 'at? You got no right here!"

Tom said, "Stow the guff. You do your job, I'll do mine!"

The figure moved restlessly. Tom started to walk by, then turned on one heel, and reached back. His right hand caught the lookout by the throat, his left socked home a punch which almost tore off the other's head. The man went down without the slightest murmur.

Tom possessed himself of a black automatic. He located the door, with its broken glass, forced almost from its hinges despite its weight. He slipped inside the night club.

THREE men came hurrying. The leader said, "Okay, Butch?"

"Okay," said Tom, trying to imitate the voice of the guard.

One of the three men carried a sack which seemed to bulge. He chuckled, "Thousands for the split, pal. It was a pipe!"

They came closer; one started through the door. Tom went into action like a wildcat with two iron claws. The muzzles of his own revolver and the automatic whirled in the air, crashing against skulls. Two men dropped senseless.

It was the suddeness of the attack which made it successful. Tom seized the sackful of money and tossed it into the kitchen of the club.

Then he was outdoors. Already a messenger was running towards the Tampania. The man cried, "Snap it up! They're in the Mammoth. You wanta spoil the getaway?"

Tom said, "Come over here! Butch got a rap on the head!"

The man came, without suspicion. Under Tom's guns, he turned pale. Tom instructed tersely. "Take off your belt and these other guy's belts. Tie 'em up!"

He got them all tied with enough security to last for awhile. Then he said, "Okay, hard guy, and now it's your turn."

He did a good job on the one conscious mobster, gagging him with towels from the kitchen. Then he gagged the others; he hurried outside. He'd been lucky, he knew, not to be forced into firing a shot. And he knew also that the first sign of danger to Grey would be the end of Mary Hazelton and Matt.

Tom got one man inside the hotel, in the corridor, with the muzzle of his gun again turning the trick. Then there was a rush of four men, all coming down the narrow hall. Tom dragged his fallen quarry, got him outside. Standing beside the doorway, he let two men come through.

He slammed the third, was deft as an adder in striking the fourth. The other two turned, primed for the attack.

"The bulls!" one gasped, pointing his gun.

Tom kicked at the gun, drove it from the man's hand. A glancing blow from the other knocked him off balance, but he managed to prop himself against the wall. One came too close, and Tom encircled him in the crook of his forearm. The other tried to find a target for his dangerous-looking .45 revolver.

Tom fired from the hip, praying that the flat sound of the automatic in his left hand would not carry too far. The man dropped, a bullet through his head. Tom gave another jerk at the figure under his arm.

The man flopped convulsively, Tom's grip tearing at his Adam's apple. Tom swung him and pressed the muzzle of the automatic to his temple. He said, keeping his voice almost inaudible, "How can you talk to Grey on that radio?"

"The . . . . the car . . . ."

"You're talking to him, pal," Tom said grimly. "Let's go!"

The man wabbled, but was able to walk. In the lobby of the hotel, the clerk was out of sight, and the bellboys were tied up in the elevator cage. It had been a quick, neat job, Tom had to admit. Grey had undoubtedly planned each tiny step of the double raid.

The car was parked at the curb, in front of the hotel next the Mammoth. It was a large, seven-passenger crate, not new but in fine condition. The radio was buzzing when Tom dragged his victim into the front seat.

Grey's voice said irately through the loud speaker: "You're late reporting. This is KFR27, salling KFG75."

The man switched a knob. "This is KFG75. All is well . . . All is well. . ."

Tom held the gun tightly against the man's head, and now he gave an extra jab. The man said, "We're signing off. . ."

Tom clicked the switches himself. He said, "Where's Grey sending from?"

"I don't know nobody named Grey."

Tom said, "I'll ventilate your skull, so help me! You brought me out here when I mentioned his name!"

"You—you said he talked on the radio. I knew it must be the Big Guy—but I dunno nothin' else about him."

"Where's Red the Goon?"

"With the Big Guy. We was to meet them, up the Beach. . . . Place called Saddle Cove."

"Get going for Saddle Cove." Tom said.

He smashed the radio with two strokes of the guns he held. "If you're real smart, you'll go even farther, my friend."

The car leaped away. He hated to see the mobster get loose, but he had to have that car leave as though nothing wrong had happened. How soon Grey and the Goon would be on the scene was a matter of conjecture, now.

He ran back into the lobby of the hotel. There was not a second to lose. Right now he was taking a desperate chance that Matt and Mary would not be killed before Grey was off to his getaway. Somewhere inside the Mammoth were the pair he sought.

He was aware that he had stopped the double robbery. But had he signed the death warrant of his friends?

CHAPTER FOUR

Bullet Standoff

HE COULD not even be certain which way to lay the ambush. There was only one thing to do. Tom ignored the bellhops tied in the elevator—they would only call the police, he reasoned—and got into another car.

On the fifth floor he got out. At the door of Mary Hazelton's room he bent, scrutinizing the carpet. It was up to Matt, now. If they hadn't knocked out the small, astute gambler, there was still a chance.

There was a bit of rice going south in the corridor . . . .

The trail went past the elevator, and Tom moved quicker; his blood was pounding, now, as time grew shorter and shorter. The bellboys, the clerk, the crooks in back, all would be working at their bonds.

On the way to the sixth floor there were two more kernels. On the seventh were half a dozen.

He didn't bother to go up any farther. He went onto the seventh floor, through the heavy fire door, glancing up and down. A pile of rice caught his eye.

It was the room in which lay Snakey Collins! Tom stopped dead, mentally rehearsing the time element. Yes, it was possible! Grey and Red the Goon had killed Snakey, taken over his room without the knowledge of anyone in the hotel. When it had been feasible, they had wandered to other empty room. When Tom had heard Grey's voice, Grey had been in Mary Hazelton's room!

He crouched outside the door now,

waiting for a sign. From within came subdued murmurs. Then the Goon's voice came through, "We gotta knock 'em off, all right."

Tom could not hear Grey's low-pitched reply. The Goon answered, "Sure, I'll scrouge 'em! Why not? What's another murder t' me, Boss?"

Grey laughed a little. Tom stared up and down the corridor, suddenly aware that a frontal assault upon that door would result only in disaster. Again there was little time.

He spied a door alongside the elevator shaft, and he ran to it. It was narrower than the door to the hotel rooms. Inside were cleaning tools, and a step-ladder.

He was back in an instant. He felt the ladder shake under him. As he braced himself, Grey's voice said, "Throttle the girl first, Red. I've got a grudge against this Durkin."

The transom was partly opened, but Tom could not see. It was slatted, like a venetian blind, and it was not too sturdy. He used his revolver barrel, prying with as little noise as possible. To his amazement, the sound of a radio suddenly blared from within. Grey explained, "In case I have to hit Durkin, or shoot him!"

Red said, "'At's the brain, Boss."

Tom exercised his great strength. The transom gave suddenly. His left hand caught it, steadied it.

Only one broad shoulder could get through. He cocked an eye down and said, "All right! Hold it!"

Red the Goon had his hands almost on the throat of Mary Hazelton, who was bound to a straight chair with strips of a torn sheet. George Grey had a gun in his hand, holding it on Matt.

Grey looked up. Without batting an eye, he said, "It looks like a standoff, Kincaid."

Tom said, "Step away from the girl, Red."

Grey said sharply, "Don't move! Not an inch. If you make a break, Kincaid, I'll kill Durkin!"

Tom said, "Okay. I can hold this all night. If one of you makes a move, I'll shoot you both."

GREY'S face was calm, but his eyes gleamed with the light of the mania which lay close to their surface. His voice did not change. "It will be an interesting test. Unfortunately, the police are interested in this hotel. There's not much time, Kincaid."

"I'll take my chances with the cops."

"They'll believe me before they will you," said Grey confidently.

"They would—if Red wasn't wanted by the New York police," Tom muttered. "And if certain hoods piled up downstairs were not safe for questioning."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Red the Goon moving imperceptibly. He froze. Grey would certainly kill Matt first of all. Tom could get the Goon, maybe Grey, with his skillfully handled gun, but that would not save Matt from the half-mad Grey.

He talked fast: "If you'll step over against the wall, I'll give you a start. Turn Mary and Matt loose and let them walk out the door. I promise I'll give you half an hour before I get after you."

"Not a chance!" jeered Grey. "Climb down from there, Kincaid. You're licked. You can't make me believe you took care of the men I had downstairs. Climb down, or I'll shoot and send us all to hell."

Grey did not mean that, Tom knew. But Red the Goon was dangerous—he was going to make a reckless, certain death play. He was wanted for murder, and any chance was better than facing the electric chair—

Mary Hazelton struggled with the bonds which held her, throwing herself sideways.

Grey cried. "Stop her!" and Red the Goon made his play. Tom saw his hand streak for the weapon under his arm. He swiveled the pearl-handled gun, held his shot until the last possible second, calling. "Stop, Red!"

Mary Hazelton toppled her chair to the floor. The lights in the room went out as she fell across the cord of the single lamp. Matt had got loose and was struggling with Grey.

Tom came down from the ladder. He placed his gun against the lock, fired upwards, so as not to hit anyone inside with a ricochet. The door swung open, and he lunged into the room.

Something banged against him. He reached out, seized hold of a body.

Matt yelled wrathfully, "Leggo me, Tom. He's getting away!"

Tom tried to get up. He tripped over the chair holding Mary Hazelton.

"He made the stairs!" Matt yelled. "Let's go after him!"

Tom said, "No! We can't!"

"Why not?"

Tom got to his feet ruefully, bent to extricate Mary Hazelton from her bonds. He said, "Matt, we're not in the clear. Heads are sticking out of the doors down the hall now. We've got to stache our guns, clean ourselves for the cops on those other killings."

"But he'll get away!"

Tom sighed. He helped Mary Hazelton to her feet. The blonde woman leaned against him—she was still unafraid, but her legs were weak. "Grey always gets away." Tom said. "Let's get Mary back to her room. I've got to call Jim Gorse at Headquarters. They saw me downstairs, and I've got some hoods down in the back to turn over to the cops. I think I can clear us, all right. But running after Grey, won't help us any."

"He's a murderer twenty times over!" Matt exclaimed. "I'll kill him on sight, next time. He pulled the trigger on me, just now. He'd have killed me in cold blood!"

"I knew you were loose," Mary Hazelton said breathlessly. "I tried to distract them. . . ."

"Let's go down to Mary's room." Tom suggested. "I've got that piece of cloth from Red's coat. I can square us with Jim Gorse. We'll get Grey another time, Matt."

His eyes were tired, and deep inside him there was a dull ache. It was always the same—he'd get Grey into a corner, and through circumstance, luck, and the foresight of the cunning ex-banker, the prey would escape.

Tom held tight to the arm of Mary Hazelton going down past the fearful, curious faces of disheveled hotel patrons.

She looked up at his granite face, smiling. He shook his head. He said, "You're game, and sweet. But this Grey—he has to be done away with. I've been at it for a year, and he's stronger than ever. I'll be after him until one of us gets it. . . ."

She said softly, "You'll win, Tom Kincaid. Never believe for a minute that you won't win."

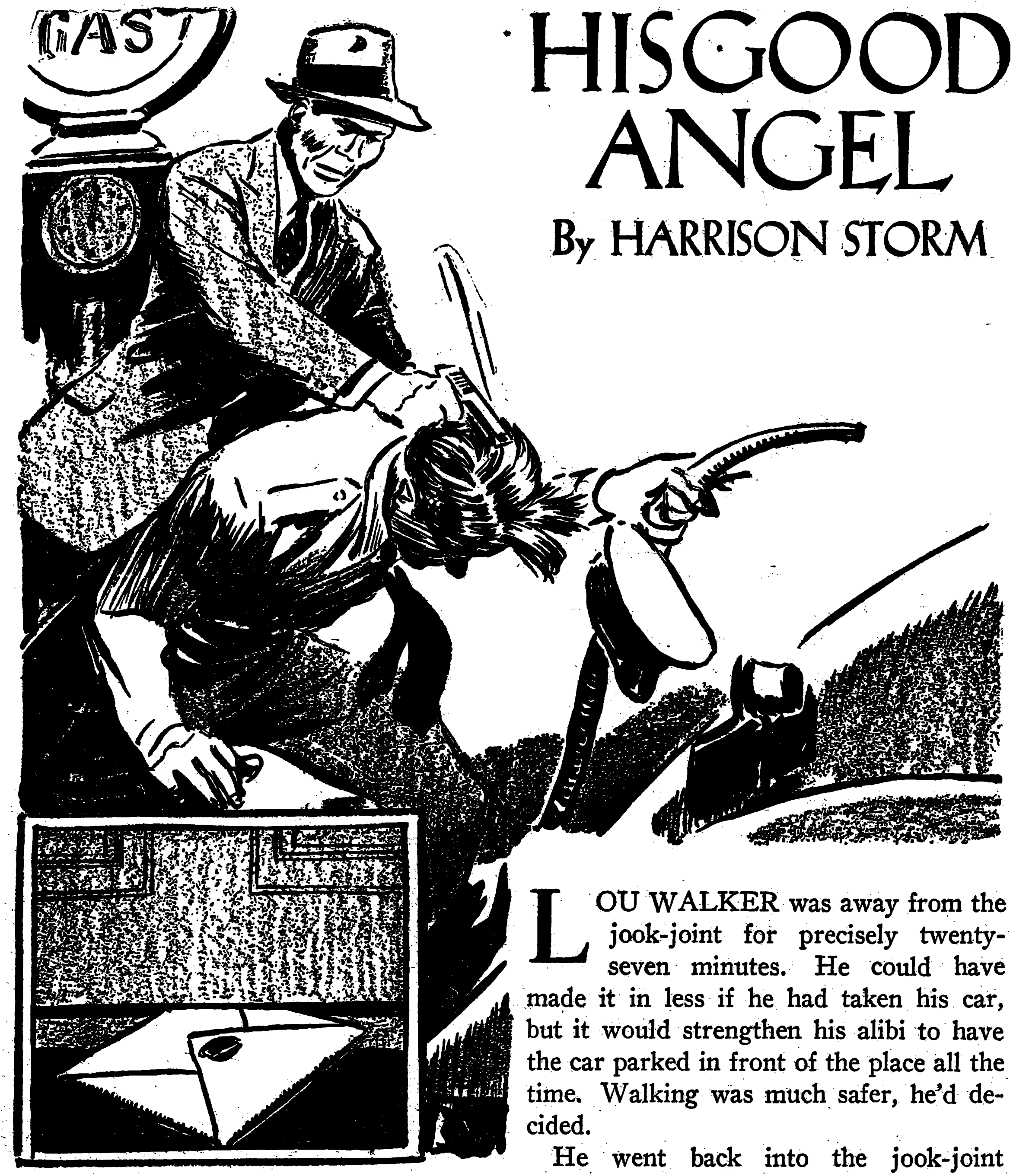
◆

ON Biscayne Bay, as a rosy dawn tinted the horizon emerging from the southern night, a motorboat coughed. A man said, "But Boss, didn't we get a single dime outa it?"

Grey said, "Get up some speed! Get out beyond the point there. A white yacht will put up a rocket." He consulted his watch, and smiled bitterly. "The time will be just right. Only—I should be carrying the—er—swag, shouldn't I?"

The man shook his head. The motor boat sped south.

THE END



He came up behind the attendant and smashed down with his gun.

HIS GOOD ANGEL

By HARRISON STORM

Everyone, they say, has a guardian angel. Lou Walker's "good angel" watched over him carefully, even saw him through a successful murder alibi. It talked to him, advised him, warned him. And finally . . . But read for yourself this most unusual mystery!

LOU WALKER was away from the jook-joint for precisely twenty-seven minutes. He could have made it in less if he had taken his car, but it would strengthen his alibi to have the car parked in front of the place all the time. Walking was much safer, he'd decided.

He went back into the jook-joint through the rear door. There was no-one in the narrow, smelly back hall. Lou removed his hat and coat, and hung them there. He lighted a cigarette, and strolled nonchalantly into the main room.

Agnes was dancing drunkenly without a partner, and she practically fell into his arms. "Where you been, Lou, honey?"

"Can't a guy brush his teeth?" Lou said tersely.

The room was too crowded for anybody to have noticed that one person had been gone for a while. Agnes didn't matter—she was too filled with liquor to be able to remember later. Lou danced with her through the blue cigarette smoke, calling attention to himself by singing loudly. Soon others joined in. He'd been singing just before he'd left, so if the others were questioned, they'd assume that he'd been there all along.

Baldy Orr was sitting alone at the table, watching him and Agnes. When the record ended, Lou steered Agnes to a chair, and walked over to Baldy's table. He ordered beer.

"Your shoes are wet," Baldy said.

"So what? I went out to my car to get some butts."

Baldly patted his hairless pate. "You took a long time, and you don't get wet like that in a few seconds. Why'd you go and come the back way?" He leaned confidentially forward. "Don't worry, Lou. Nobody knows. They're too drunk. And you know I'll alibi you any day."

Lou looked at him. Baldy could be trusted as well as any man, but the point was that on this job Lou wasn't trusting anybody. One-man jobs were safest; they didn't leave anybody to rat on you.

He said coldly: "I got my feet wet going out to my heap."

"Sure," Baldy agreed heartily.

For another hour Lou hung around, pouring nickles into the record player so he would continue to be noticed. He said a loud good-night to whoever was left, and drove to the run-down hotel where he lived.

When he pushed in the door to his room, he saw the envelope on the floor. It was the color of glowing coals and his name was written on it in white ink. He switched on the light and tore open the envelope. The paper inside was the same flaming red and on it, in a fine white script:

Of course you had to kill Spencer Carothers. He was the sole witness against you in the fur racket, whereby you extorted money from fur manufacturers through strong-arm methods. Without Carothers' testimony, the D. A.'s case against you will fall apart.

It was worth murder to avoid a certain extortion rap. You worked it cleverly. At 11:17 P. M. you walked up to the front door of Spencer Carothers' house and rang the bell. When Carothers opened the door you filled him with lead.

Before the shots had died away, you were among the bushes along the side of the house and slipping through to the opposite side of the block.

But the cops can add two and two. You are the one man who benefits by Carothers' death. The D. A. promised Carothers protection, so he will move heaven and earth to pin the murder on you.

I said you were clever, but not from a long range perspective. The trouble with you is that you rely too much on your gun. Couldn't you have worked it another way? You might have taken more time and care and inveigled Carothers out somewhere in the country and run him over with your car. Accidents happen to anybody, and the cops wouldn't have given more than a puzzled thought to you.

However, there's no need to worry. The cops will sweat you, but your alibi will stick.

Your Good Angel

THE WHITE script danced crazily on the red paper. Who the devil could have written this? Baldy Orr? No—Baldy might have guessed he'd gone out to kill Carothers; but Baldy couldn't write this kind of English, and he wouldn't know the details. And he had left Baldy only about twenty minutes ago. This letter must have been written shortly after Carothers' death.

Lou went across the room to the phone and called the hotel clerk.

"Anybody around to see me tonight after eleven?"

"Nobody, Mr. Walker. It's been a very quiet night. Is anything wrong?"

"Forget it."

Lou Walker hung up and read the letter again. The funny thing about it was that it sounded friendly, as if whoever'd written it was on his side, and worried about him. *Your Good Angel!* Wasn't that a spirit everybody was supposed to have—something that watched over you?

He laughed thinly, took off his hat and coat and read the letter for a third time. The red linen paper and the white ink gave him the willies almost as much as what was in the letter. . . .

Next morning there was another red envelope under his doorway. He saw it while he was still in bed; and he stared at it, breathing heavily. Then he jumped out of bed, and ripped the envelope open with trembling fingers.

> *This morning at exactly seven minutes to eight, the police will arrive at your room.*
>
> *I am afraid you were not as clever last night as you believed. You recall that fifty feet from Spencer Carothers' house there is another house just like it. As that second house was dark, you did not see the man on the porch. His name is George Foster and he likes to sit in the darkness and watch the rain.*
>
> *When Carothers opened the door in response to your ring, the light was on in the foyer behind him. As you no doubt remember, the sudden flow of light released by the opening of the door almost blinded you for a moment. It was then that George Foster saw you. Your coat collar was pulled up and your hat was pulled down, so that Foster could not see your face. But he did see the red and yellow feather you sport in your hat-band.*
>
> *That's bad. If the cops find your hat with that feather in it, they have a case against you. You know what to do before they arrive, so that your alibi will hold.*
>
> *Your Good Angel*

It was uncanny. This Good Angel knew what nobody but he himself could know: how his face had been hidden from anybody but Carothers, and how that sudden rush of light had momentarily obscured Carothers there in the doorway.

Lou went to his dresser, looked at his wristwatch: a quarter to eight. The cops would be here in eight minutes—if there was really anything to this warning. He knew, with a queer sensation of awe, that there was. Generally he slept until eleven or twelve, but this morning he'd awakened in time to get rid of the feather. In a way it frightened him.

He got his hat from the closet and carefully removed the red and yellow feather, which he flushed it down the drain.

The minutes ticked away. Seven to eight came and went; and Lou found himself waiting for the footsteps in the hall. There was silence. More minutes passed, and he started to chuckle softly, laughing at himself. This was one time the Good Angel had fallen down.

At two minutes after eight fists pounded on the door. Lou opened the door in his pajamas, pretending to be rubbing sleep from his eyes. Sergeant McVey of Homicide stepped into the room, followed by two detectives.

"I got sad news for you," McVey drawled. "Spencer Carothers was murdered last night."

Lou yawned. "Who's he?"

"You've heard of Carothers?"

"Oh, him. Say, you're not trying to pin it on me?"

"Trying?" McVey laughed derisively. "We got you all wrapped up, ready for the chair."

Lou saw the two dicks rummaging in his closet. They brought out two hats.

McVey seemed disappointed." That all the hats you got?"

"Ain't two enough?" Lou asked

McVey ordered him to get dressed. While he was getting into his clothes, they took apart his bedroom and bathroom; but he had had sense enough to ditch the gun.

He was tying his shoelaces when he became aware of the radio announcer's voice drifting in through the open window from the floor below. The voice said: "At the sound of the gong it will be exactly eight o'clock."

Lou glanced at his wristwatch, and saw that he had nine after eight. That meant that he was nine minutes fast and that the cops had arrived at seven minutes to eight on the dot, as the Good Angel had predicted. And the first thing the cops had looked for was the feather in his hat-band!

Suddenly Lou started laughing. McVey spun angrily toward him. What's so funny?"

"You'll never know, copper," Lou said.

He felt fine. The Good Angel angle was the screwiest thing he had ever heard of—and the best. Those two letters had called each turn, past and future. With something or somebody like that watching out for him, what did he have to be afraid of?

◆

IT WAS not yet dark when Lou walked out of Police Headquarters. A couple of his ribs were sore and his jaw was bruised, but he'd expected that. A going over in the squad room was a small enough price to pay for murder.

They couldn't dent his alibi. The police snorted when Baldy Orr and Agnes were brought in and swore that Lou hadn't been out of the jook-joint for a moment; but it was testimony all the same. Then they contacted the others, finding several college kids from respectable families among them. Everybody recalled that Lou Walker had been the life of the party before, during and after the time of murder—and everybody indignantly denied having been too plastered to know whether or not he'd stepped out for a while.

Motive wasn't enough to send a man to the chair, but Sergeant McVey kept working over him until Wittles, Lou's mouth piece, showed up at Police Headquarters with a writ.

"But don't think you won't burn sooner or later," was McVey's parting admonition.

"Looks like you're doing the burning, copper," Lou mocked. "You're burning up."

Several days later, while lunching in a restaurant, Lou came across a small item in an afternoon paper. Baldy Orr had stuck up a grocery store and, with the storekeeper yelling behind him, had walked smack into a cop. There had been only seven dollars change in the till.

Lou grinned mirthlessly. It served the sucker right. Those small-time jobs were a lot of risk, and paid peanuts. You had to be smart, like himself. He'd rubbed out a guy and the cops knew he'd done it—yet they couldn't lay a finger on him!

He finished his coffee and paid the check, and for a while he stood in front of the restaurant. Gradually it dawned on him that he was worried. Baldy was the only one who knew defiinitely that he had been out of the place at the time of the murder. Baldy knew how long he'd been gone, and about his shoes getting wet.

Nothing to be scared of, though—Baldy wouldn't rat. He knew that if he did his life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickle, inside of jail or out.

Lou found himself walking to his hotel, wondering if there would be a red letter waiting for him. Since the second letter which had warned him about the feather and the fact that the cops were coming to pick him up, he had been looking for another. So far there hadn't been any.

There was one now, all right. It lay just inside his room, with his name, white on red, looking up at him. He ripped open the envelope and read the script:

> *Baldy Orr sang to the cops. He is a three-time loser and the D. A. promised to go easy on him if he smashed your alibi. The cops had a hard job breaking him down, but the prospect of a forty year jail sentence was too much for him.*
>
> *The cops are on the way now to your hotel. They will reach your room at 2:40.*
>
> *Your Good Angel*

It was practically that now—no more than three of four minutes to spare. Lou peered out into the hall, saw that it was empty, and went over to the fire-stairs. The ground floor door opened a few feet from the door to the corner drugstore, which had a rear entrance from the hotel lobby. He slipped into the store, through whose window he could watch the hotel entrance.

He bought cigarettes and was scooping up the change when a sedan pulled up in front. Three men got out. The first was Sergeant McVey.

Lou left the drugstore by the door leading to the side street, and walked rapidly away from the hotel, smiling to himself. Whenever danger threatened, his Good Angel got him out of it. He had stopped trying to explain the why and how of the letters. It was enough that once again the Good Angel had saved him.

◆

HE WAS bound for his garage a couple of blocks away when suddenly he stopped. The cops would know where he garaged his car and would probably have a man there. Anyway, the car was registered in his name. It would be hotter than a stolen car. So Lou Walker hopped a bus.

Long ago he had decided that if the cops were ever after him on a serious charge he wouldn't hole up in the city, where a stool pigeon could sell him out. The county was big; a man could lose himself easily in it.

Near the outskirts of the city, the bus passed a used car lot. Lou got off. To steal a car would be sticking his neck out. He was smart; he played safe every time. And as he always made sure to carry a few hundred dollars on him, he was able to buy a used coupé, under an assumed name.

He drove west, not hurying. Even if the cops suspected he'd left, they wouldn't have any idea which way he was going. He could out-think the whole force—he and the Good Angel.

There was, however, one weak spot in his escape. He'd spent nearly all his ready cash for the coupé; and now, as he neared Chicago, he was running dangerously low on funds. He had a gun, but he had more sense than to try a stick-up. Even a vague description of him flashed on the wires would put nation-wide murder heat on him.

Needle Moran, who had been the closest thing to a pal he had ever had, had moved to Chicago a couple of years ago and set up a cheap hot spot which was a cover for an assortment of rackets. Needle would be glad to help him out with a grand or two until the heat died down.

It was midday when Lou reached Chicago. After he located Needle's place, he parked a few blocks away from force of habit and walked back. As he crossed the street to the block where Needle had his place, he reached into his topcoat pocket for a cigarette. Something was in the pocket beside the pack—a stiff square of paper!

Lou's hand shook a little when he pulled it out. It was a red envelope.

He looked around at hurrying, unfamiliar faces. Just before he had parked his car he'd taken out a cigaret and the letter hadn't been in his pocket then.

He continued across the street and, trembling, stepped into a doorway. Even here, a thousand miles from home, the Good Angel was at his side! It wasn't possible. Nobody could have known which direction he'd taken. He might have headed north to New England, or south, or anywhere. Yet his Good Angel was still on the spot, watching over him.

The letter read:

You are smart, but the police are smart also. Fortunately they have no way of knowing you bought a car and have no description of it. As a matter of fact, they have no reason to think you are not still in town, although Sergeant McVey knows that there is a chance you might have fled the city. However, he believes it would be in a stolen car and so is checking that angle.

Sergeant McVey, as you know, leaves no stone unturned.. It is no secret to him that you and Needle Moran were once partners, and he figures that if you reach as far as Chicago you will go straight to Moran for a hideout or a stake.

So the Chicago cops are sitting on Needle Moran's tail. Watch your step.

Your Good Angel

LOU STUCK the letter in his pocket and returned to his car. Slowly, he drove past Needle's place, his eyes alert. Directly across the street from the entrance a thick-set man was lounging, and Lou knew a detective when he saw one.

His mouth twisted grimly. He had known, by now, that it wasn't necessary to check up on the "Good Angel." He—or it—was never wrong. . . .

He stopped off at a drugstore, and phoned Needle Moran. He heard Needle's husky voice and said: "Needle? you know who this is?"

There was a pause. Then Needle growled: "I ain't got time for guessing games. I got enough trouble with the bulls on my neck wanting to know where Lou Walker is. How should I know? They're in my hair all day, hanging around, maybe tapping my wire. Don't horse around, guy."

Lou's teeth clicked savagely. "I'm Bill Jones. What about that loan you promised me?"

"Sorry, Bill. No can do."

There was a click. Lou looked at the receiver, then hung up and went out to his car. Moran was scared, with good reason. Did the Chicago cops know who had called? They couldn't have recognized his voice—but had he said anything that had given him away? No, once again he'd been too smart, and if he wanted to stay smart, he'd better get out of Chicago as quick as he could.

He headed southwest. When he reached Kansas, he was down to his last two dollars and his gas tank was practically empty. No more letters from Good Angel, which meant that there was no pursuit. Well, in one way he had it all over the cops. Through the Good Angel, he could tell every move they made—before they made it.

He bought five gallons of gas, a meal and a couple of packs of cigarettes, which cleaned him out. He had to get his hands on money before night, and there was only one way left.

With darkness, he drove into an isolated service station. He snapped off the dashboard light and kept his chin on his chest as the attendant—a moon-faced kid—came out.

"Fill 'er up!" Lou said. When the pump registered twelve gallons, he slid out of his car, came up behind the attendant, and smashed down with his gun. The attendant's legs folded.

Lou cleaned out the cash register inside—a little over twenty-three dollars. Chicken feed, but it would keep him going for a few more days, until he could work himself loose of this run of bad luck.

The attendant was breathing regularly, which was swell. Lou had no compunction about killing a man, but little attention would be paid to just another service station stick-up, whereas murder would have brought every cop in the country.

After putting fifty miles between himself and the gas station, Lou stopped at a roadhouse. A steak and a couple of beers, topped off by an expensive cigar, gave him a feeling of solid contentment. He got into his car and switched on the lights—and he froze.

A red envelope rested against the inside of the windshield. He had learned that a message from the Good Angel was a certain sign that danger threatened.

Sticking his head out of the car door, he looked around. The parking space next to the roadhouse was silent and deserted, except for four or five empty cars. Did this Good Angel spring out of nowhere? He, or she, or it, was always present, without any hint of physical substance save for written words.

Lou opened the letter:

You fool! Simply because you did not happen to have a pair of gloves on you, did you have to be so careless as to leave fingerprints on the service station cash register when you removed the money?

The local police have not yet tested the register for fingerprints, but the prints are there, and they will be discovered before the night is much older.

Meanwhile, leaflets containing your photo and fingerprints have been sent throughout the country. Now do you realize what a mess you are in? The local cops will check the prints found on the cash register against those on the leaflet—your presence in Kansas will be known and your description will be broadcast throughout the surrounding states.

I shall, however, continue to do all I can to overcome your mistakes. At the very least, you shall be forewarned by me of impending danger. For, after all, I am,

Your Good Angel

Donald G. Cormack, author of *Death's Delivery Boy* (appearing elsewhere in this magazine) is featured in our next issue. Read his latest novelette—DANGER—HEARSES AHEAD!—a rare treat for all mystery fans!

HIS cigar suddenly tasted like smoldering straw. He was no amateur; lacking gloves, he had tried to be careful. Yet it seemed that there was always a slip-up. He used to laugh at cops when they insisted that a crook always made at least one mistake.

Lou kicked the starter and swung his coupé out on the road. What the hell, he still had a big advantage. His Good Angel—it was better than having a short-wave radio in his car by which he could follow the movements of the cops. This Good Angel of his even knew what the cops were thinking.

By midnight he'd crossed the state line in Oklahoma; he was breathing more easily. He had figured on driving all night, but as his eyes grew heavier, he decided that safety didn't lie in the simple matter of distance. He had to depend on his wits and the breaks and, chiefly, his Good Angel.

At a cabin court he hired a cabin for the night. He fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

All at once he was wide awake. It was still dark. He could hear his wristwatch ticking under his pillow, and his heart thumping furiously. Cold sweat covered him as he listened.

Voices whispered outside, and he heard a foot scrape over gravel. Yet there was something else, more intense and more immediately urgent—a voice, it seemed, that made no sound. . . .

"Lou Walker? Do you hear me?"

At first he thought the voice was within his own brain. It repeated his name. Lou sat up, realizing that the voice had substance, that it came from outside himself. Yet, it did not sound like a human voice. It came from nowhere in the room and at the same time from everywhere, possessing a strange, flowing quality.

"Who are you?" Lou asked.

"There was no time to send one of my letters."

"The Good Angel!"

"Your Good Angel," the voice admitted. "I come to you when you are in danger. I've done my best to save you, but you have made too many mistakes. Listen! There are police outside. They're going over your car for fingerprints. If the prints match those on the gas station register and on the circular, they will know you are the murderer of Spencer Carothers!"

Lou flung the covers off; he padded to the nearest window. The cabins were arranged in a semicircle, and the tourists' cars were parked in front of the cabins. His coupé was no more than thirty feet away. He saw two men, one who held a powerful electric lantern, while the other dusted powder on the steering wheel.

He swung away from the window, reaching for his gun.

The voice said: "Shooting won't help. The cabin is surrounded. You can't break through."

Lou peered about, searching under the bed, in the tiny bathroom. There was nobody in here with him—but that voice.

"What are you?" he asked fearfully.

"Haven't I helped you in the past?"

"Yeah, sure. But who are you?"

Perhaps I am nothing at all. Perhaps I am a guardian angel who watches out for even the worst of mankind. Haven't I tried my best to save you?"

With his pajama sleeve, Lou wiped sweat from his forehead. "Yeah. But now—"

"When you shot down Spencer Carothers in cold blood, didn't I tell you it was a foolish way to get rid of him?"

"I had to do it," Lou whispered. "That guy's testimony would've sent me to jail. I was sitting pretty, until Baldy ratted on me. He was the only one knew I was away from that jook-joint. He saw that my feet were wet and figured right off that I'd rubbed out Carothers. But—"

He checked himself. The cops outside

would have the prints in a couple of minutes. He had to get away—

"Listen," he pleaded. "You got me out of spots before. How do I get out of this one?"

His answer was laughter. It was a human voice now, mocking and triumphant, in the cabin with him.

Something crashed down on his back and smashed him face-first against the floor. Steel fingers gripped his gun-wrist and twisted. Lou screamed with pain, thrashing, trying to shake off his assailant; but a knee dug into his back.

THE door burst in, lights flashed on. The weight slid off Lou's back. Wearily, he raised his head, and looked up at grim-faced men.

One of them tapped a notebook in his hand. "It's all here, Hopkins—his confession that he murdered Carothers."

A slim man with a thin, lined face and tired eyes said, "Good."

Lou Walker sat up. "Where's—"

"Your Good Angel?" the slim man asked, smiling. "I'm Detective Hopkins, and I have a penchant for writing letters in white ink on red paper."

"No!" Lou stared at him. "The Good Angel was on my side!"

"That's what you thought," Detective Hopkins said. "We knew you'd murdered Carothers and that the chances were we couldn't pin the crime on you. So I got the notion to worm my way into your confidence. It's been done before, but I tried a new variation."

"But—there were things—"

"That only you could know, or that hadn't happened yet?" Hopkins waved a hand. "After all, how much was in my letters? It was easy to foretell the future when I was the one who arranged the future—such as the exact times when Sergeant McVey paid you a visit. We knew you'd killed Carothers at 11:17 because the shots were heard. It was plain from the position of the body how you'd done it. There wasn't any man named George Foster who saw the feather in your hat-band, but it was known that you sported a red and yellow one. Baldy Orr didn't rat on you, but by that time I'd impressed you with my apparent supernatural knowledge and you believed me.

"I hadn't counted on the merry chase you'd lead me," Hopkins went on. "I thought when you believed that Baldy Orr had squealed, you'd be driven to a hideout where my letters could work you around to a confession. We had men all around the hotel before Sergeant McVey arrived; you were tailed to the used car lot. We had the number of your plates, and the police in each state cooperated in keeping tabs on you. It was easy, because you didn't know you were being watched every minute. In Indiana, I picked up your trail in my own car. When you neared Chicago, I reasoned you'd look up your old pal Needle Moran, so I arranged for the Chicago police to pester him.

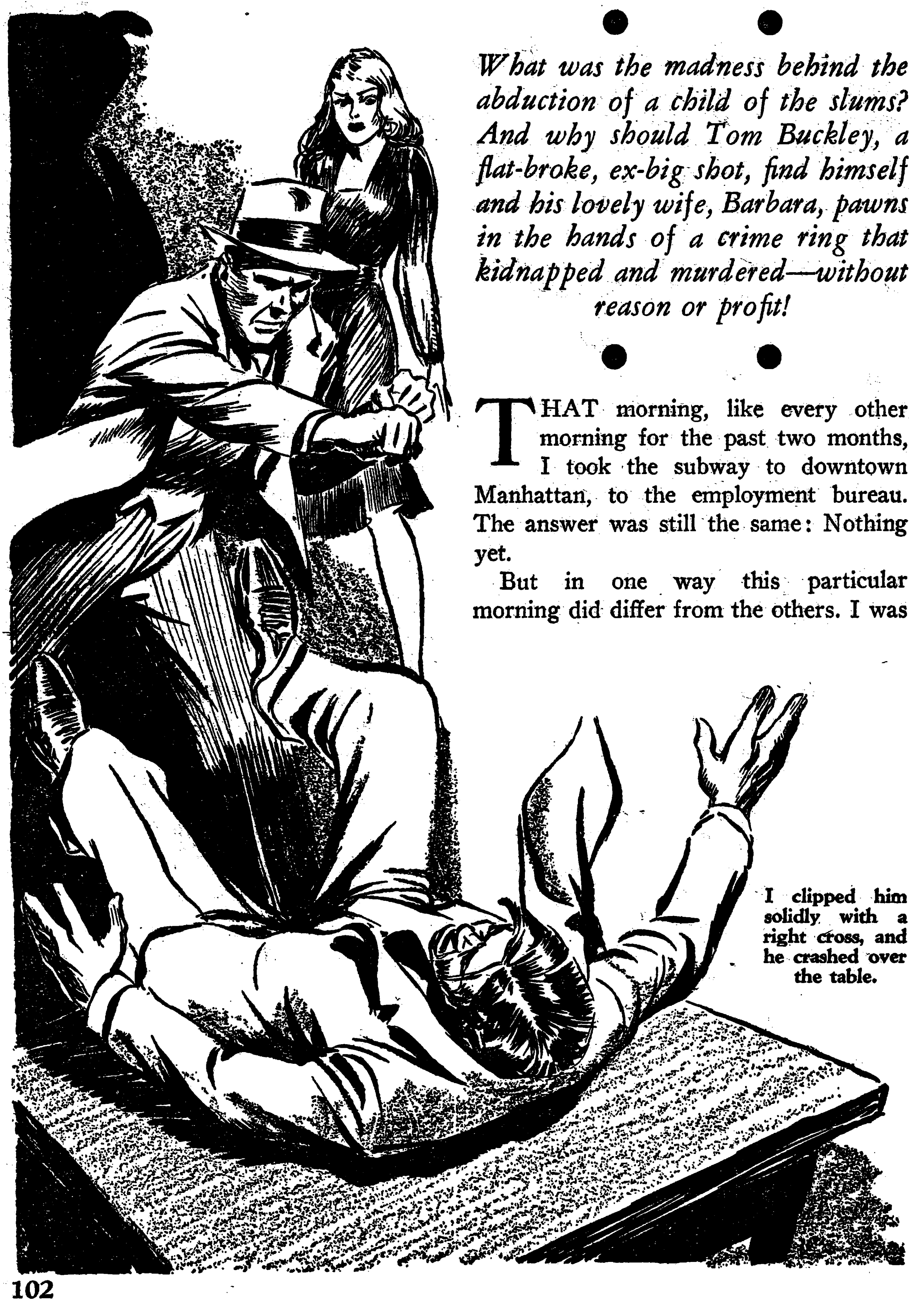
"I let you get too far ahead when you stuck up that service station. You might have killed the attendant, which would have made me an awful dope. The Kansas police located your car outside the roadhouse, and I left the note and got set for the final play. You didn't know I was right behind you. Later you didn't know I was lying stretched out on a ceiling beam and that men were squatting under the windows—and that one of them took down every word of your confession. It was trouble, but we've gone to more trouble than that to get a confession from a killer. Now we two are going two thousand miles back home."

Lou pushed himself up to his feet, trembling with rage. "Good Angel!" he shrieked. "Nuts!"

Somebody laughed . . . .

DEATH'S DELIVERY BOY

By DONALD G. CORMACK



● ●

What was the madness behind the abduction of a child of the slums? And why should Tom Buckley, a flat-broke, ex-big shot, find himself and his lovely wife, Barbara, pawns in the hands of a crime ring that kidnapped and murdered—without reason or profit!

● ●

THAT morning, like every other morning for the past two months, I took the subway to downtown Manhattan, to the employment bureau. The answer was still the same: Nothing yet.

But in one way this particular morning did differ from the others. I was

I clipped him solidly with a right cross, and he crashed over the table.

actually flat broke now, for my last nickel went into the turnstile.

Barbara didn't know we were broke. I'd managed to keep the seriousness of the situation from her, speaking vaguely of a savings account—one that no longer existed. And just before I'd left the house she'd said: "Tommy, stop in at the bank on your way back, will you? I have only a few dollars left for household expenses."

Stop in at the bank. Sure. Wasn't Tom Buckley the big-shot who'd never find himself broke—who had laughed at his wife's suggestions to lay a little aside? Why should he save? If he was making so much at one particular time, why next year, maybe, he'd be making twice as much. He could start saving then.

If something happened to him in the meantime, his pretty little wife wouldn't have to worry. He carried a fair sized life-insurance policy, paid a year in advance. So if something happened to him, Barbara wouldn't go hungry for a long, long time. Even if the something that happened was a deliberate Dutch act.

The thought of that insurance policy kept returning, even though I fought it each time. Not that I wouldn't have done the Dutch for Barbara's sake. It was simply that I still had sense enough to realize that Bobbie loved me, and if I were gone, her heart would break. That's what made it so tough.

I walked into the little park at the Battery and sat down on a bench. I couldn't face Barbara now. I had to think of something!

I was so wrapped up in my own painful troubles, I didn't even notice the flashily dressed young punk jittering up and down the walk in front of me. Once he sat down near me, then jumped up to begin his pacing again. It was the second time he sat down—on the other side of me now—that I paid any attention. I took a half-hearted gander at him, then looked away. But that look seemed to give him an idea; at least it gave him the courage to talk.

He swung toward me suddenly. "Look, mister, I'm in sort of a jam. It isn't money or anything." He added that last part quickly. "In fact, if you'd help me I'd be willing to pay for your time. Five bucks for about an hour's trouble."

Instinctively, I got sore. Offering dough to big-shot Tom Buckley! I was going to tell him to scram when I caught myself. Five bucks would give me another day's grace.

"Let's hear it, sonny," I said testily—pride was still there. "I'm not busy right now. Maybe—"

"Swell!" The kid jumped at my half-hearted acceptance. "Look, it's only that I gotta make a train. I can't do this myself. I have to get a letter to some people in Brooklyn within an hour—but I can't do that and make this train. If you'd deliver the letter—just hand it to the man at the address on the envelope—it'd be worth five bucks."

As simple as that, which should have made me suspicious. But the kid was fumbling in his inside pocket. He brought out a well-filled wallet and some papers. He was as nervous as a cat in a burning house, and he dropped some of the stuff. One letter—stamped and ready to mail—landed almost at my feet. It was addressed to a Degnan Gibbs, Senior, at the swanky Copley Plaza Hotel in Boston. That, obviously, wasn't the one for me, but I picked it up, gave it to him.

The young punk handed me an envelope, a five dollar bill, and a dime for carfare. The envelope was addressed simply to Mr. Ruiz, at an address way to hell and gone in Brooklyn.

"It's terribly important," he told me, and he sounded like he meant it. "Be careful with it. I'd send it telegraph, except it's so long it'd cost more than five bucks—and it might not be delivered for a couple hours. I know you're honest; you'll deliver it okay."

He got to his feet quickly, glancing at his watch. "I gotta make the ten-three train to Syracuse. I'm depending on you, mister. Thanks."

Then he was gone. I watched him out of the park and into a cab. I examined the letter again, scowling. On a sudden hunch, I held the envelope up to the sun—and the scowl deepened.

Inside was nothing but a single sentence, which I could barely make out. There was a name—Tupper—followed by an address; a slum address over on East Fifteenth Street. It could have been telegraphed in half the time it would take me to deliver it—and for about thirty cents, no five bucks!

◆

IT TOOK me a little while to locate the address once I got out into the wilds of Brooklyn. Twice I lost my way in that quiet residential section before I found the house. It was a four-story apartment building that couldn't have housed over twenty families.

I pushed the bell marked Ruiz; when the door clicked I went in and started climbing the stairs.

There was something wrong with the whole set-up, I knew, but I wasn't alarmed for myself. This thing wasn't any of my business—and if someone tried to make it my business, I could handle myself and him too.

If you've ever been out Chicago way, you've probably heard of Buckley's Gym—the one I used to own. A lot of the big fighters work out there during their between-bout periods. I'm no graybeard, but I've been around gyms most of my life; I was in the professional ring too, for a while. And even if the sudden desire to be a fight promoter in my own right did cost me the gymnasium and most of my dough, even if it did dump me in New York broke and without a job, I still had two things left. I had my perfect physical condition, and the scientific ability to punch the ears off any monkey who wanted to get tough.

When I jabbed the bell of the apartment, I heard some chains rattling loose. Then the door opened about six inches, and a hard-faced, platinum-haired girl peered out. She seemed surprised when she saw me there—as though she had expected someone else.

"I got a letter for Ruiz," I said. "It's a personal delivery."

"He isn't here," she snapped suspiciously. She was prettier than I'd thought at first. "What's it about? Who's it from?"

"I don't know," I told her. "The kid who gave me the letter didn't explain. Maybe you know him." I described the flashily dressed punk, and as I did so the door opened further.

"Come in a minute," the girl invited. "I'll find Ruiz for you."

I walked down a short hall and into the front room as the girl re-chained the door. I figured Ruiz was just moving into the place, because there wasn't any furniture in it yet. Boxes and bags stood around unopened, and there was only a wooden table and two chairs at one side of the room. A single folder lay on the table: *United States Maritime Commission; Bureau of Navigation; Inland Waterways of the Eastern Seaboard.*

Out in the hall, the girl said, "Ruiz, come here," in a conversational tone. A big, heavy-faced guy stepped out of a room right beside the front door. The two of them came back, and I handed the letter to Ruiz. He seemed to be slightly drunk.

"It's that little creep Zirinsky!" the girl exploded. "He's taking a powder at the last minute. Wait'll I see—"

"Shut up," the big guy said. "You talk too much."

He ripped open the letter, glanced at it, then shoved it in his pocket. When he did that, he pushed his coat aside, and I saw the automatic holstered under his arm. I decided to wait until his hands got up around his lapels again before belting him a fare-thee-well.

"Daley would insist on kindergarten talent," the girl said.

"Shut up," Ruiz said again. Then he swung toward me, his eyes bloodshot with drink. "Scram, you!"

That got me sore. For a minute I was going to lower the boom on the ape, just for luck; but the girl stopped me.

"Wait!" she ordered. She meant about leaving, not about slugging the boy friend. She was facing the big guy now. "How much has the cute delivery boy learned or guessed, Ruiz?"

"I wonder. And what about later—"

His right hand got up too high, then. I jumped at him, smacked his hand down. His left hand tried to ward me off, and I heard the cloth of my coat rip, but right after that it was all over for him. I clipped him solidly with a right cross and he crashed over the table.

I didn't stop moving; that girl was still behind me. I bounced onto hands and knees, rolled as I snatched up the big guy's gun, and came to rest squatting at one side of the room.

When the thing started, the girl let out a sharp yip, but she was quiet, and white-faced. She didn't look so hard or so tough now. She hadn't any gun, but there wasn't anything wrong with her voice.

"Get out!" she screamed. "Get out!"

I shoved the big guy's gun in my pocket and scrammed.

Outside, the screwiness of the whole thing hit me. Look how it stacked up: A small-time punk gave me five bucks to deliver a letter to some friends in Brooklyn—and the friends in Brooklyn tried to gang up on me, hold me a prisoner or cool me off permanently. And why? Because, later, I might discover their business in East Fifteenth Street.

One thing was obvious: Anything that was going to happen, would take place over near the river on East Fifteenth Street. If it was something criminal, maybe I could stop it. Anyway, I decided to have a look.

Talk about *asking* for trouble! Well, I got it! I should have remembered I was jobless and broke—and still had a wife to support. . . .

ON THE subway back to Manhattan, I discovered the pocket that was just about torn out of my suit. Ruiz had evidently gripped my inside pocket during the brief fight, and had pulled it out. But I hadn't any wallet to lose—I'd given up carrying one around. The only stuff in that pocket had been a couple of letters—polite turndowns on jobs I'd applied for.

I got off the subway at Fourteenth Street and walked east. I hadn't been wrong about the section. It was one of the dirtiest, noisiest, and most congested slums in the city. Pedestrians, trucks, peddlars' carts and children competed for space and headway in the garbage-littered streets. The grime-laden air that filtered between the close-huddled, ramshackle buildings was heavy with rank odors.

It was almost noon when I got there. I walked up and down the block twice, then went into the house noted in the letter. I groped my way as far as the push-bells in the foyer, saw that there was a Mr. and Mrs. John Tupper listed, and then went back to the street. I had checked what information I possessed, and could do no more. In fact, I began to feel a bit foolish after all the dark imagining I'd done. But I decided to stick around for a bit, anyway.

I hung around the section for almost an hour, gandering at the people, and waiting for I don't know what. I walked west again, looking for a clean place to eat. That five bucks the punk had given me was perfectly good legal tender, and bought a healthy meal. Feeling better afterward, I decided to have one more look at East Fifteenth Street and its people.

Everything was still the same—there hadn't been any murders or robberies or whatever it was I feared might happen. After another twenty minutes, I decided to clear out for good.

It was then I noticed the tipsy guy across the street. He'd stopped one of those ice-cream carts the peddlers push around in the summer time, and was buying chocolate-covered ice cream squares. And he was practically causing a riot by handing ice cream to the kids!

I figured for a moment the guy would be mobbed. Every dirty faced urchin for blocks around must have heard about the miracle less than thirty seconds after it began. I had to laugh. There was that half-drunk guy, buying dozens of ice-cream sticks; gravely introducing himself to the kids one by one; shaking hands and offering his present.

Everybody was watching him: the mothers of the kids were leaning out of the windows, yelling about the crazy guy to each other. All was going fine—until suddenly it happened! The happy atmosphere exploded into a thousand shattered screams, utterly without warning!

I saw the whole thing, saw the drunk turn to a little blond-headed kid—a boy about six years old—and ask his name, as he'd done with all the others. Then, instead of shaking hands with the kid and giving him an ice-cream stick, the guy grabbed the boy up in his arms and started racing down the street!

All the other children began to cry and howl; the mothers in the windows screamed; pedestrians who'd seen it let out shouts; some workmen at the corner dropped their tools and ran for the guy in a single, wild-eyed mob. The suddenly sober abductor seemed surely cornered; he didn't have a chance of getting away.

It was then the roadster slewed around the corner on squealing tires. It brakes were slapped on momentarily as the man with the youngster piled aboard; and a second later it was roaring ahead with wide-open throttle, cutting recklessly into the main avenue.

I found myself running with the others, instinctively trying to stop the crazy kidnapping. I had been in a spot where I could cut the guy off, but that was hopeless after the roadster picked him up. And then I saw the cab at the curb! The driver raced from a lunchroom and threw himself behind the wheel. When the cab lurched away from the curb in pursuit, I was clinging to its side.

The cabbie did his best. He spun that old hack in and out of the heavy traffic in a way that made me think I was on a Coney Island roller coaster gone wild; every other second we brushed elbows with death. But the car ahead gained distance on us. Then, miraculously, I saw a long, jagged furrow suddenly appear in the metal roof of the taxi. Though I couldn't hear any reports. I knew the pair ahead were throwing down on us with guns.

A few blocks after that we had lost the roadster completely. Standing beside his steaming cab, the driver looked stunned. I felt dazed myself.

"Tupper's kid!" the driver repeated to himself. "Little Jackie Tupper! Them guys must be nuts! What else? What other reason?"

I figured it the same way. The only incredible angle was that the crime had had such a careful build-up. It had definitely been premeditated! I recalled how little Jackie Tupper—heir to hunger,

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filth and poverty—had yelled in fear in his kidnapper's arms, and then had quieted down when he saw the second man, the driver of the car! He must have known that second man! The one who kept his hat pulled far down over his eyes—and who resembled, even in a fleeting glance, the guy I'd seen in Brooklyn that morning: Ruiz!

◆

I WENT straight home after that. I knew Barbara would be worried about me, because it was almost dinner time. I figured I'd have something to eat, then make some excuse to get out of the house for a while. It was my duty to tell the cops about the apartment in Brooklyn, and the guy who'd asked me to deliver Tupper's address there. I didn't think it would do any good; that apartment would probably be empty now. And I'd have an answer plenty of questions myself.

Barbara met me at the door, and threw her arms around me, waiting to be kissed.

"You got a job, Tom!" was the first thing she said. "Is that why you're so late? Is that it, honey?"

I offered the best grin I owned. "Almost, dear. I had to do a lot of chasing around. Right to the last it looked—"

"I know, Tom," she broke in. She sounded sorry she'd said that about the job. "It's a good sign, though. Tomorrow, you'll see!"

I'd decided not to tell Bobbie anything about my getting mixed up in this business, even innocently. And I didn't want to admit I'd taken five dollars for delivering a letter. I saw it was going to be tough pretending, though—I'd never kept anything from Barbara.

She said she hadn't done the shopping yet, and asked me if I had any money. I gave her the four dollars as though I had a hundred more in my pocket, and

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she hurried out. I guess she could see I was hungry. I snapped on the radio. It was easier to think to music, I'd found.

Some of the crazy jigsaw pieces began to fall in place now. I realized that four people had carefully planned the kidnaping of little Jackie Tupper. They were: the couple in Brooklyn; the driver of the car, whom the girl had called Daley; and the flashily dressed kid, called Zirinsky. But Zirinsky, the finger man for the outfit, had lost his nerve at the last minute. He'd sent the address to them, but Ruiz hadn't had any phone in that temporary apartment; the mails would have been much too slow; and an open telegram would have been too dangerous. So he picked me.

It seemed obvious that Daley's drunk scene on the street had been a makeshift plan to find Jackie without Zirinsky's identification. It certainly had gathered the kids of the neighborhood in one spot, and as soon as Jackie's identity was known, the kidnaper had grabbed him and run. Jackie had recognized Ruiz, the driver of the car.

That much added up all right. But the big question still remained: Why kidnap the child of poor parents?

I was so lost in thought, I didn't realize how long Barbara had been gone. When it occurred to me, I became uneasy; but I didn't want to alarm Bobbie unnecessarily with my nervousness. I decided to wait ten minutes longer, but at the end of five slow minutes, I left the house.

She wasn't in any of the usual shops; none of the neighbors had even seen her come out. Then I really did get panicky. I ran back to see if she'd returned to the apartment in the meantime—and came to a dead stop at the foot of the stairs. One of Barbara's gloves was lying there; and over by the back door to the alley lay a second glove.

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Then I saw the note stuck in our mailbox. My hand shook as I plucked it out, because somehow I knew what it would say:

> *Lay off, chump. We keep the skirt to see you do. Shut up, forget everything, and keep away from the cops. We'll know if you go to the law. One wrong move and the girl goes overboard for keeps! Be smart!*

I DON'T remember going back to the apartment. I kept reading that note, as though that could erase the words and bring Bobbie back. After a little while the daze worked off.

Go to the cops? That wouldn't do much good. What information I could give them wouldn't lead to a quick solution—and my wife would probably die as the result. And the police, right now, were out to find the Tupper boy. Though I tried to fight it down, I realized Barbara would die anyway—unless! . . . Unless I could do what the city detectives couldn't do: Find the kidnapers within an hour or so!

I knew that the letters I'd dropped in the fight had given Ruiz my name and address. After seeing me again at the scene of the kidnaping, chasing the kidnap car, he'd decided to get me out of the way, for he no doubt supposed I knew more than I really did. It had been simple enough for him to get to me—but how could I find him?

"In the mystery kidnaping of the Tupper boy this afternoon," the radio was saying, "the police are withholding all information in the interests of the child. The mother was prostrated by the news, and the father, John Tupper, a shipping clerk, seems dazed and uncomprehending. Only one new development has come to light thus far: A wealthy man in another city has offered a reward of fifty thousand dollars for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the men responsible. The same sum will be paid for the safe return of the boy."

It must have been my previous thought of the letters I'd dropped in Ruiz' apartment, tied in with the news about "a wealthy man in another city," that gave me the lead. It popped into my brain automatically: That letter—sent Airmail, Special Delivery—which Zirinsky had dropped in the park! The one addressed to Degnan Gibbs, Senior, in Boston! Could he be the wealthy man?

There was one way to find out. . . .

The taxi dropped me in front of the public library within a few minutes, and there, in the back-newspaper files, I found Degnan Gibbs' past history.

I was sweating, and my knees were water when I got back to the street. I had the whole thing in the palm of my hand now—if I could find the spot where Ruiz and his gang had holed up!

It was dark now. I stood on the steps of the library and watched the night traffic with unseeing eyes as I tried desperately to dig an answer—even a vague lead—out of some forgotten incident in the immediate past. I had to think of some bit of information that wasn't known to the cops. That was Barbara's only chance.

The police had known the kidnapers couldn't get far in an open car—it had been found abandoned near Ninety-Sixth Street and the East River. But had they switched to another car, or were they somewhere in that neighborhood!

From the moment I'd met Zirinsky, I repeated in memory every step I'd taken, every word spoken, every trifling incident I'd seen. Finally I managed to get something—that folder on Ruiz' table: *Inland Waterways of the Eastern Seaboard!* It had been an official folder—probably maps and government charts, which indicated a boat! That would be much safer than a

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car. The state police can't block rivers!

Another thing seemed to prove that hunch. The warning note to me had unconsciously been a dead give-away: *"One wrong move and the girl goes overboard for keeps!"*

I raced into the street and grabbed a cab, even though I hadn't a cent left in my pocket. And then we were there.

Then I did the one thing I regretted having to do. I got out of the cab on the driver's side, as though to pay him—but instead I grabbed him by the coat, pulled him toward me, and clipped him.

I was alone among the black wharfs and factories along the river.

"This is it!" I whispered to myself.

I WASN'T bothering with the numerous land hideouts in this section. I was looking for a small craft offshore, one that showed signs of activity aboard. At Ninety-Seventh, I saw what I was looking for: a dim white hull near the shore, with a light flickering through a porthole. If this were it. . . .

There was only one way to find out. I took off my shoes and coat, and slipped into the filthy water.

There was only one guy aboard—the one who'd done the actual snatching. He was fussing with the motor, and I could see the food, fuel and baggage already stored for the get-away.

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Savage fury boiled up in me as I stood behind the unsuspecting thug.

"Daley," I whispered, "I've come for information."

As he spun around, I slapped him with a hefty open-handed blow. I clipped him again with the other palm as he sat in front of me. He was too dazed to make a sound. You can really hurt a man with a solid open-hand blow. I asked, "Where are the others, Daley?"

He didn't give in right then—but he did shortly. His face was puffed when he pleaded for me to stop. He showed me a rowboat, and we went back to shore.

Daley was headed for an empty warehouse—a small dilapidated building, with a For Rent sign hanging hopelessly on one side. On a sudden hunch, I ordered him to stop.

The cab driver I'd clipped had evidently come to and driven away. He hadn't been there when I'd doubled back from Ninetieth Street, but I knew he'd return. I was right. Within thirty

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5.25-17	2.45	1.15
28x5.25-18	2.45	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
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31x5.25-21	2.80	1.15
5.50-17	2.75	1.15
28x5.50-18	2.75	1.15
29x5.50-19	2.75	1.15
6.00-16	3.15	1.45
6.00-17	2.85	1.15
30x6.00-18	2.85	1.15
31x6.00-19	2.85	1.15
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seconds, he was coming around the corner, with a cop hanging on the side of the hack. I whistled to them and waved my hand, then prodded Daley ahead of me as we entered the building.

I stood to one side as Daley knocked out a signal on the door. Ruiz opened the door a crack.

"It's about time!" he snapped nervously, turning away. I whacked the gun out of his hand, and planted him on his shoulders in two swift movements. Then the cop and the cab driver were with us.

Barbara let out a squeal of joy and was in my arms in a flash. I didn't take my gun off the four thugs; I kept them covered until the cop got over his momentary surprise and unlimbered his own revolver, grasping the set-up at sight of little Jackie Tupper, gagged and helpless at one end of the room.

Without warning, I handed my gun to Barbara, walked over to Ruiz and slapped him down on his back again. For a few minutes after that I gave him the same dose Daley had received. The cop didn't make a move to stop me. When I'd finished, Ruiz was blubbering in fear.

"Tell us about Gibbs," I said. "And about Gibbs, junior. Explain to these witnesses how you worked for Gibbs."

"I was the old man's chauffeur," Ruiz mumbled through swollen lips. "I was with him before the son married, and after he had the fight with the old man, I saw my chance. That's all."

"I'll explain that," I told the others. "It was all in the papers. Young Gibbs married a show girl eight or nine years ago—without the old man's approval, against his strong objections. The old man disinherited his son, but the son had pride, and he knew what a swell girl he'd married.

"It was when the son was born that young Gibbs thought he could win the old man over. He was almost right. The old man *did* fall hard for his grandson, but his pride wouldn't let him retract. Instead, he swore he'd get custody of the boy and still refuse to acknowledge his own son—unless the son gave up his wife. He began wrecking every job the son got, trying to force him to leave his wife. That's why young Gibbs changed his name to Tupper and came to New York."

Ruiz went on wearily. "I saw him on the street. The plan came to me then, but I was afraid I'd be recognized. I knew the old man would pay plenty to get his grandson back. So I got ahold of Daley, asked him to make friends with some guy in the shipping department where Gibbs worked. I had to find out his name—the one he was living under—where he lived, and what the kid looked like. I hadn't seen him in three years.

"Daley made friends with that punk Zirinsky. He got all the dope for us, then got scared. After sending the information to us, he beat it out of town. But we changed our plans quickly, decided to go ahead with the thing anyway. Zirinsky was supposed to mail an extortion or ransom demand to old man Gibbs. When that reward was offered, I knew Zirinsky had done that much, anyway. Otherwise Degnan Gibbs wouldn't know Tupper and Gibbs, junior, were the same."

Bobbie had already untied Jackie Tupper and had taken him in charge.

"That's a nice piece of change you're getting, son," the cop said. "Fifty thousand bucks!" He whistled at the thought.

"More than that," I told him. "Fifty thousand and five bucks. And all for delivering a letter! Some tip!"

Barbara didn't know what I meant, but she kissed me anyway, wet clothes and all. I felt pretty swell, but later I felt even better. I found out, you see, that because of this, pride had been buried. Old man Gibbs and his son's family were reunited. And about time!

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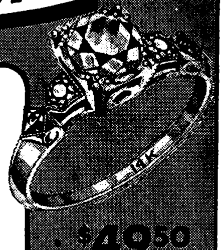

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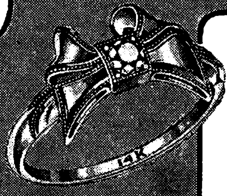

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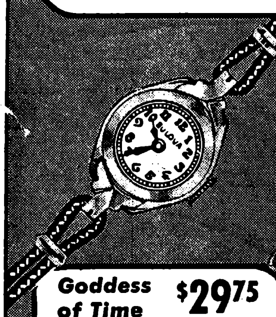

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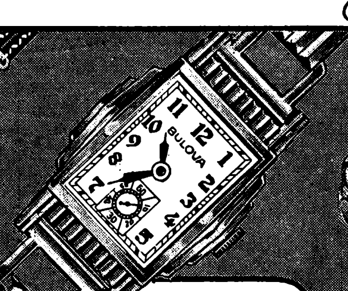

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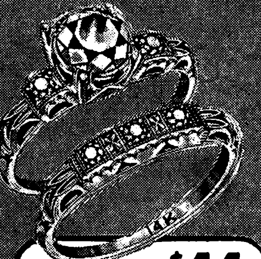

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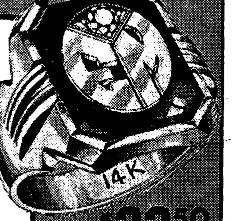

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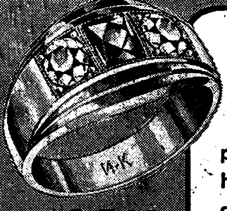

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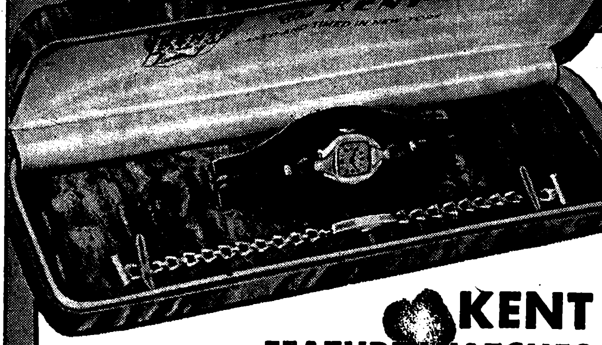

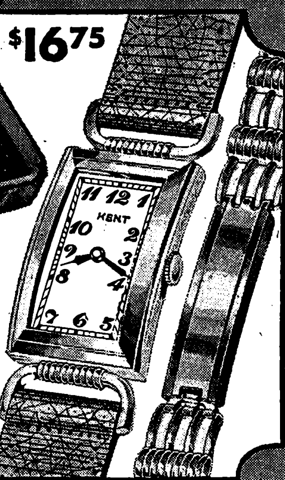

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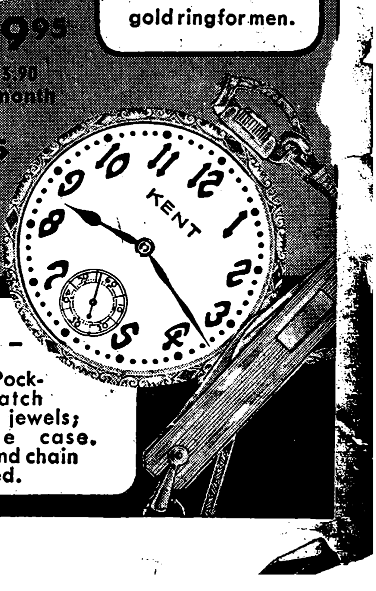

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